

EVIDENCES
OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION;
Briefly and plainly stated.

BY
JAMES BEATTIE, LL. D. F. R. S. E.

PROFESSOR OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN MARIS-
CHAL COLLEGE, ABERDEEN, AND MEMBER
OF THE ZEALAND SOCIETY OF ARTS AND
SCIENCES, AND OF THE LITERARY
AND PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY
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M,DCC,LXXVI.



ADVERTISEMENT.

THIS little work was originally intended for the use of some young persons, with whom I am connected. During a visit I paid last year to **THE BISHOP OF CHESTER (DR. PORTEUS)** at his delightful parsonage at Hunton in Kent, I showed his Lordship a sketch of the first and second chapter, and gave him a general account of what I meant to introduce in the sequel. He said, that something of this kind was much wanted; and that a comprehensive

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view of the principal evidences of **CHRISTIANITY**, drawn up in such a manner as to fix the attention without fatiguing it, might be highly useful in establishing the religious principles of our youth, at their first entrance into the world. He was pleased to express, in pretty strong terms, his approbation of my whole plan, and of the execution, as far as he had seen it. He favoured me, both at that time, and afterwards in the course of our correspondence, with important hints for the management of some parts of the subject. And he desired me to finish the performance as soon as possible, and send it to the press.

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ON the strength of this encouragement chiefly, I have ventured to make it publick. And To His LORDSHIP, AS A SMALL, BUT AFFECTIONATE, MEMORIAL OF THE FRIENDSHIP WITH WHICH HE HAS LONG HONOURED ME, AND TO WHICH I AM INDEBTED FOR SOME OF THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF MY LIFE, I BEG LEAVE TO INSCRIBE IT.

J. BEATTIE.

1785.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N.

THAT there is in the world, and that for more than seventeen hundred years there has been, a RELIGION called THE CHRISTIAN, will hardly be controverted: and that it must have derived its origin from some person or persons, who introduced and taught it, seems to be equally certain, or at least will not be denied by those who allow a cause to be necessary to the production of an effect.

THIS religion, say the Christians, derives its origin from JESUS CHRIST; a person of unequalled wisdom, unexampled goodness, and supernatural power;

power ; who taught it to his disciples, commanding them to preach it in all nations. This religion, says the infidel, admitting that Jesus introduced it, derives its origin from imposture and falsehood, and owes its continuance to the enthusiasm, the knavery, and the folly of mankind.

THE tendency of this religion, say its enemies, is to darken and bewilder the understanding, to interrupt the pleasures of life, to confound human affairs, to debase the mind by superstition, and to make men timorous and cruel. The tendency of this religion, say they who are better acquainted with it, is to enlighten the mind with true wisdom ; to banish superstition ; to promote universal righteousness, charity, and peace ; to comfort us in adversity, and give prosperity its highest relish ; to encourage
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the most transporting hopes, with full assurance that they will not be disappointed; to repress every malevolent and every evil passion; to make men, whatever their outward circumstances may be, resigned and thankful; and, in a word, to promote their happiness, both in time, and through all eternity.

OPINIONS so opposite cannot both be true; and they, who have the means of knowing the truth, ought to inquire on which side it lies. If this religion be from heaven, to be indifferent about it is inexcusable, and must be dangerous. And no man is entitled to say, that it is not from heaven, till he have studied its evidence and doctrines, and found the former insufficient to satisfy a fair mind, and the latter unworthy of a divine original. To refuse to believe, or inquire about

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this religion, because one may have read or heard some things plausibly written or said against it, would be as uncandid, as to refuse all information concerning my character, for example, except that which is known to have been given by my mortal enemy. Between the two cases, however, there is this difference; and a very considerable one it seems to be. To the greater part of mankind it is a matter of no moment to be informed, whether I be honest, or the contrary, a man of sense, or a fool. But if the Christian religion be true, and that it is false has not yet been proved, it must be a matter of infinite concern to us all, that it be accurately studied and well understood.

IN defence of Christianity many excellent books have been written; by Grotius, Clarke, Locke, Lardner, Butler,

ler, West, Lyttleton, Sherlock, and others, whose integrity and learning will not be called in question. The design of this little work is, not to supersede as unnecessary, but to recommend, and serve as an introduction to, the perusal of those great authors; by showing as plainly, and as briefly, as I can, to every candid reader, and especially to the young, that the evidence of this religion is at least strong enough to merit attention and deliberate inquiry. If I can accomplish even this purpose, I shall do service to a cause, which, as a friend to mankind, I have always had very much at heart. For, from several conversations which it has been my chance to have with unbelievers, I have learned, that ignorance of the nature of our religion, and a disinclination to study both it and its evidence, are to be reckoned among the chief causes of infidelity.

I HAVE sometimes met with little practical treatises called *Ten minutes advice*—to those who are about to engage in such or such an enterprise. Those performances may have their use, though they should not contain a full detail of the business alluded to. I mean to give *Two hours advice*—to that person, who may be in danger from the books, or from the company, of infidels, and is candid enough to desire to be informed, in few words, whether the evidence on the other side be so plausible as to deserve the notice of a rational mind. If I shall satisfy him that it is, he will naturally lay me aside, and have recourse, for further information, to those authors who have gone through the whole subject, and illustrated and proved many things, which the narrowness of my plan permits me only to affirm, or perhaps only to hint at. And, which
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is far the most important part of the whole procedure, he will at the same time REVERENTLY CONSULT those Sacred Oracles, which contain the history of Divine Revelation; and which he will find, more frequently, perhaps, and more fully, than he could have imagined, to carry their own evidence along with them. And when he has done all this, in the spirit of candour, and with an humble and docile mind, and a sincere desire to know the truth and his duty, I may venture to assure him, that he will not regret the time he has employed in the study, and that from the writings or conversation of unbelievers his faith will never be in danger any more.

THE reader now sees what is aimed at in this little book. If he think my pretensions too high, or my hopes too sanguine, he will allow however, that

as the subject of a free government, I have an undoubted right to publish, whether they be attended to or not, the reasons which have determined me to adhere to that religion wherein I had the happiness to be educated.

EVIDENCES, &c.

CHAP. I.

REVELATION IS USEFUL AND NECESSARY.

THE evidence of the Christian religion is a subject of great extent: all I purpose to do is, to give a summary view of it. I do not mean to produce proof for every one of the assertions I may make concerning matters of fact: for this would require a great deal of time. But knowing, that to the best cause every sort of misrepresentation is injurious, I shall be
careful

careful to advance nothing as certain, but what does admit of proof, and has actually been proved by the learned authors, who have distinguished themselves on the side of truth in this controversy.

THIS evidence has been divided into external and internal: the former arising from prophecy, miracles, and historical testimony; the latter, from the peculiar character, and intrinsic excellency of the Christian religion. Some authors have enlarged chiefly on the one sort of evidence, and some on the other; and some have been equally attentive to both. I shall speak, first, of the external evidence, and, secondly, of the internal; though occasionally perhaps, and in order to avoid prolixity and needless repetition, I may speak of both at the same time.

THE first thing to be inquired into is, the importance and usefulness of Divine Revelation. For, if such a thing be useful and important, and even necessary to man, it must be suitable to the divine wisdom and goodness to bestow it.

1. IF man had persevered in his primitive innocence; if human principles and practice had no influence on human happiness, or on each other; and if ignorance, inattention, and prejudice, if superstition and sensuality, if savage life and sanguinary passions, had no tendency to corrupt mens opinions, to pervert their reason, and to plunge them into guilt and wretchedness;—on these suppositions, I should readily admit, that there is no need of revelation. But from daily experience, and from the history of men in all ages it appears,

appears, that not one of the things now supposed is agreeable to fact.

THAT man did not persevere in innocence, requires no proof. That corrupt principles and criminal practice lead to misery, and truth and virtue to happiness, is as evident, as that order is preferable to confusion, security to danger, and a wise and good man to a barbarian or wild beast. That, even though our intentions be good, we must mistake our duty, if we are ignorant of the nature of that being who is the object of it, will not be doubted by those who have observed, that we must believe a man to be our parent or benefactor, before we can be sensible that we owe him the duty of gratitude or filial affection. And that mens notions of all the objects of duty, of their Creator, their fellow men, and themselves, are liable
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to be perverted, and in every country unenlightened by revelation have been perverted, by the weakness of the human understanding, by the force of prejudice and passion, by vice, by inattention, by superstition, and by ignorance, the history of mankind proves to be a melancholy, but incontestable truth.

THIS being granted, it will follow, that a revelation, which rectifies and ascertains mens notions of the several objects of duty, by explaining the nature of God and of man, and by informing their conscience with respect to particular duties, must be highly important and beneficial; and must even be necessary to the attainment of that degree of happiness and virtue, whereof human nature appears to be susceptible, and for which, therefore, we may presume that man was made.

2: THE character of the Supreme Being, and the nature and destination of man, must be very imperfectly known to those who have received no positive information concerning the reality of a future state, and its connection with the present. Now this is a point on which all the evidences collected by human reason, while unaided by divine light, amount to nothing higher than probable conjecture. But that better evidence, in so interesting a matter, must be a desirable thing, will be acknowledged by all men:—unless there be men who believe that a future state is an absolute impossibility. Revelation, therefore, seems to be necessary, to give such evidence of another life, and such intelligence concerning it, as may vindicate the divine goodness and wisdom with respect to the constitution of the present; and such as may also prove
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a comfort to good men, and a restraint on the passions of the wicked ; and such, moreover, as may serve for a solemn intimation to all men, that their behaviour in this state of trial is to them a matter of infinite importance. That this last consideration strengthens morality, or promotes at least the peace of society, and, consequently, the happiness of mankind, seems to be admitted by the enemies, as well as by the friends of religion. Else how can we account for that favourite notion of the infidel, that religion was contrived, and is patronised, by politicians, in order to overawe the world, and make the passions of men more manageable ?

3. REVELATION is further necessary, to explain on what terms we may hope for pardon, consistently with the perfection of divine justice. Of the

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necessity of expiation for guilt, all mankind seem to have had an idea ; as appears from the universal use of sacrifices. But, from the multitude of the pagan expiatory rites ; from the absurdity of all, and the impiety of many of them ; and especially from the circumstance of their consulting oracles on the subject of atonement ; we may warrantably infer, not only their ignorance of duty in this particular, but also their consciousness of that ignorance. And some of their best philosophers of the Socratic school seemed to think, that, till God should be pleased to reveal his will in an extraordinary manner, it would be impossible for man to know what religious service would be most acceptable to him. To those, who were so wise, and so candid, as to think and speak in this manner, may we not presume, that the Christian doctrine of repentance and
faith,

faith, if they had rightly understood it, and if they had known its evidence, would have been a most welcome discovery?

To our infidels, indeed, it is not welcome; for they say they have no need of it: being, it seems, fully satisfied, that, however ignorant Socrates might confess himself to be, they have all the knowledge that man has occasion for. And yet, if it had not been for this manifestation of divine grace and truth, they would, probably, at this day, have been consulting oracles, offering incense to idols, or perhaps, like many of our remote forefathers, polluting the creation with human sacrifices. Certain it is, that in these things no material reformation was ever introduced, or attempted, by the philosophers of old. That men should worship the gods, and per-

+ form the sacrifices, and other rites, as by law established, was the doctrine not of Pythagoras and Epictetus only, but of Cicero, a wiser, or more learned man at least, than either, and even of Socrates himself, the wisest of them all. So that, if philosophy had been man's only guide, it is probable, nay it is more than probable, that idolatry would at this day have been his religion.

4. REVELATION is yet further necessary, in order to make the whole of human duty not only *known*, but *obvious to all capacities*. The best heathen moralists acknowledged their ignorance in some points of duty; and what they knew they had not power to enforce upon the common people, who, in ancient times, were very illiterate, having rarely access to books, whereof there were then but few in
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the world. Though they had possessed such power, and been all of the same mind, which was by no means the case; and though they had not been prompted, as most of them were, by pride, vanity, or the spirit of contradiction, to introduce new systems, yet their labours could have but little effect. Such arguments as they had to offer the greater part of mankind could not understand. For, in fact, the common people, in general, are not capable of perceiving the force of arguments, especially when the reasoning is complex, and relates to matters so remote from sense as the truths of morality and religion. Of this some ancient lawgivers, as Minos of Crete, and Numa of Rome, were so sensible, that they thought it prudent to ascribe to their institutions a divine original, pretending that they received them from the gods.

I do not mean to say, that the doctrines of the philosophers, particularly of Socrates, and the better sort of Stoicks, did no good. What Socrates taught, or rather conjectured, concerning the immortality of the soul; and what both he and the Stoicks delivered, though not always clearly or consistently, with respect to the divine existence, providence, omnipresence, and omnipotence, was, no doubt, of use in dissipating some of those clouds of superstition and error which then overshadowed the nations. But, as a system of natural religion and moral duty, all ancient philosophy was very incomplete, as Socrates well knew; nor was it accompanied with evidence or authority sufficient to raise the attention, or convince the understanding of any, except perhaps of a few speculative men: and even they were inclined, as Lactantius, Cicero, and
Aristo-

Aristotle* testify, to make it a subject of declamation and dispute, and a mere *tongue-exercise*, rather than a rule of life. Indeed, if we believe Laertius, who, though neither an elegant nor a judicious writer, yet deserves praise as a collector of anecdotes; nay, if we believe Cicero, to whose judgment more respect is due; we must also believe, that the greater part of those, whom antiquity honoured with the name of philosophers, were men of loose principles and bad morals. Many of them disgraced human reason by their profligate tenets and sophistical wrangling; and some of them, by their impudence, buffoonery, and beastliness, were a disgrace to human nature.

* Lactantius, iii. 15, 16. Cicero, Tusc. quæst. ii. 4. Arist. Ethic. ii. 3.

BUT,

BUT, even from the best of them, what was to be expected in behalf of the common people, that is, of mankind? Socrates was the most popular, and, in all respects, the least exceptionable teacher of heathen morality. He taught, that is, conversed in public as well as in private; and all who chose it were permitted to attend him. But he never set himself up as a general reformer, nor did he pretend to more wisdom than other men. And, as the charms of his conversation drew the chief men of Athens around him, we may presume, that the common people, probably not very curious to know what he said, would keep at a distance. Besides, his peculiar way of reasoning, by question and answer, though as fair and satisfactory as can be, is better suited to the purpose of instructing a small circle of friends conversing familiarly and at leisure, than

than of conveying knowledge to the common people.

ABOUT the common people the Stoicks gave themselves no trouble, but seem to have considered them as little better than beasts. Some of their paradoxes would appear, from their extreme absurdity, to have been contrived on purpose to exclude the herd of mankind from the sublime mysteries of that philosophy. And many of their tenets they rapt up in strange language, (for they were very licentious in the use of words); and they so perplexed the human intellect by frivolous disputation, that their teaching could not be generally useful; nay, even to those men of learning who had made it their study, it must have been in many particulars unintelligible. Cicero, indeed, in his book of moral duties, explained the
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+ practical part of their moral philosophy in a clear and elegant style; and, by so doing, enriched his native tongue with the best system of Pagan morality extent. Yet still it is an imperfect system; and for a great part of it he was indebted, not to the Stoicks, whom, though he followed, he did not follow as a translator, but to Plato, Aristotle, and his own good sense.

THOUGH the Stoicks had been better qualified than they were for the office of public teachers, the people would not have greatly profited by what they taught. That external things are neither good nor evil; and that to be stretched on a rack, or to repose on a bed of roses, are, to a wise man, matters of equal and absolute indifference; is a tenet which the generality of mankind could hardly believe, and which, if they did
believe

believe it, was more likely to do them harm than good. For from this principle it would require no profound skill in logick (and the Stoicks were deep logicians) to infer, that, by robbing a wise man of his money, cutting off his leg or arm, stealing his child, or murdering his friend, they only took that from him on which he set no value. That men ought to be resigned to the divine will, but that, when any thing vexed them, they had an undoubted right to make away with themselves, after the example of Zeno, who in a pet hanged himself, because he had hurt his finger*; would, to a man of plain sense, appear neither very consistent doctrine, nor very beneficial. That the Deity is superior to fate, and that fate is superior to the Deity, is not more consistent; and

* Diogenes Laertius.

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that the world is God, or at least his body or substance, is an aphorism that throws no great light on the first principles of theology. That the soul is immortal, is affirmed by Seneca; who also affirms that death is nothing, and reduces every thing to nothing, and that the tranquillity of the dead is the same with that of those who are not born*. That at death we return to the elements whence we came, and lose all personal existence; that there is no future punishment or reward, and that it is no matter whether there be any or not; are doctrines of the same school, alike unfriendly to happiness and to virtue. That pity is unworthy of a wise man, is a strange lesson to inculcate on beings so frail as we are, who stand so much in need of the compassion and kindness of one another:

* De Consolat. ad Marc. cap. 19.

yet this was taught by the followers of Zeno. And that human souls are part of the divine essence, and that a man may become equal, and in some respects superior, to the Deity:—Is this audacious and impious tenet likely to have any other effect than to cherish pride and presumption so extravagant, as to harden the heart against every amiable affection, and make the understanding equally impatient to hear, and incapable to receive, the dictates of true wisdom?

IN fact, notwithstanding the morals of some of them, which I am not anxious to find fault with, and the beauty of many of their sentiments, which I readily acknowledge, I am in doubt, whether, as teachers of the common people, they would not have been as blind guides, as even the Epicurean themselves. The doctrines of the lat-

ter were downright atheism : and those of the former plainly lead to it ; as indeed every form of false philosophy must do, that teaches men to think and speak irreverently of the Supreme Being, and to deny a future state of retribution. Of the Stoicks, therefore, Milton, who knew them well, spoke neither rashly nor too severely, when he said ;

Alas ! what can they teach, and not mislead,
Ignorant of themselves, of God much more ?
Much of the soul they talk, but all awry ;
And in themselves seek virtue, and to themselves
All glory arrogate, to God give none.

PARADISE REGAINED.

BUT, when the fulness of the time
X WAS come, THE TEACHER OF THE
POOR did at last appear : not, like
the Stoick, proud hardhearted and
disputatious ; but, like the Son of
God,

God, meek and unaffected, compassionate and lowly, divinely benevolent and divinely wise. 'Go,' said he, to two of John's disciples, who had come to ask whether he was the Messiah, 'Go your way, and tell John
' what things ye have seen and heard;
' how that the blind see, the lame walk,
' the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear,
' the dead are raised, *and* good tidings
' are preached to the poor.' All this had been foretold by the prophet Isaiah; and in Jesus the prophecy was fulfilled. And his doctrine was distinguished from that of all other teachers, not only by its intrinsic excellence, and by those mighty works that bore testimony to its truth, but also by its being in so peculiar a manner addressed to the poor, and suited to their capacity, and consequently to that of all the rest of mankind. His birth was announced, not to the great ones

of the earth, but to shepherds. On poverty of spirit, or lowliness of mind, which is indeed the foundation of the Christian character, he pronounced a particular benediction: his servants he chose from among the poor: and, by the establishment of a church, he provided a perpetual succession of ministers, who should preach the gospel to the poor, and to all other ranks of men, to the end of the world. In consequence of this most gracious dispensation, the meanest of the Christian people, if it is not their own fault, may, in all ordinary cases, learn juster notions of virtue and vice, of God and man, of providence and a future state, than the most learned philosopher could ever attain in the days of paganism. Can these facts be denied? And in him who admits them is it possible that any doubt should remain, concerning the usefulness of divine revelation,

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or the infinite importance of that which is brought to light by the gospel?

LET not then the infidel pretend, that human reason is alone sufficient to discover the whole of man's duty, and establish in the world a complete or comfortable system of natural religion. For it is certain, that, even in the most polite nations, unassisted reason never did this, and in the opinion of Socrates, never could. And of barbarous nations it will not be said, that their reason ever made important discoveries of any kind. And it deserves particular notice, that what our infidels call natural religion is in a great measure, as Rousseau himself acknowledges, derived from that very scripture, which they absurdly and wickedly reject. I do not mean, that their ideas on this subject are acquired by

an actual perusal of holy writ. In this study it is to be feared that few or none of them ever made great proficiency. Those ideas they derive from impressions made on their minds in infancy and early youth; when, together with the humility and candour, it is probable they also had, what every Christian must have, the teachableness of little children. The writings too, and the conversation of Christians, to which, in these parts of the world, they must sometimes attend, may convey to them principles, which they admit as rational, though perhaps they might be inclined to overlook, if they knew them to be scriptural.

If revelation be so highly important, it is most suitable to the wisdom and mercy of God to bestow it, and some persons even of the heathen,

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then, particularly Socrates, were not without hope, that one time or other it would be bestowed. So far was that great man from asserting the sufficiency of his knowledge, with respect either to divine or to human things, that, though by no means a sceptick, he used, through excess of modesty, to say, that he knew nothing but his own ignorance. He taught, that the gods grant extraordinary communications of wisdom to those to whom they are propitious: and recommended it to his friends to have recourse to oracles, and other religious rites, in order to obtain from heaven such necessary or useful information as human reason was not of itself able to supply*. Indeed the oracles, divinations, and auguries, so much attended to by the pagan world, prove, as already hinted,

* Xenoph. Memorab. lib. 1.

their consciousness of their own ignorance, and of the need that mankind have of supernatural illumination.

Of their oracles we know little, and can affirm nothing but what partakes more or less of conjecture. That they were the contrivance of priest-craft, has been said, and may in part be true. It has also been said, that demons had a concern in them; and this no considerate person will affirm to be impossible. Perhaps they may have been permitted by Providence to keep up in the minds of men a sense of the insufficiency of human reason, and to make them think, as Socrates did, that divine revelation was, at least, a desirable thing. This is certain, that Socrates had faith in them; that, tho' some of their answers might easily be accounted for, others are rather extraordinary; that Providence did, for a time,

time, permit them ; and that, soon after the great revelation took place, they became universally silent. These facts deserve the attention of those who reject the gospel.

BUT, however desirable revelation may be, and however beneficial, we must not have the presumption to think that the Deity is *obliged* to bestow it. For this we have no better reason than to suppose that he was obliged to create man at first ; or that he is under any necessary, determination, arising from the perfection of his nature, to make men archangels, or to make all men equal in rank or sagacity. His dispensations of benevolence and grace are all gratuitous. We have nothing but what we have received from him, and what he might have withheld, without any imputation on his goodness,

ness, or any diminution of his eternal and unalterable felicity.

NOR 'is it possible for us to judge how far it may be consistent with the views of his providence, to make this revelation universal. Its good effects may be so, though it is not universally known: for it teaches, that persons, who lived long before our Lord appeared on earth, and who never heard of his name, may be saved by his merits.

THIS being admitted, no conclusion unfavourable to Christianity can be drawn from the circumstance of its being known in some parts only of the world, and not known till four thousand years after the creation. For if it had been known one thousand, or three thousand years sooner, a captious mind might still ask, why it was not earlier,

earlier, and coeval with mankind, or at least with the fall. Whatever concerns man must have a beginning; and that Being who governs the universe, who alone perfectly knows his own counsels, and who sees at once the past, the present and the future, can alone determine *when* any particular dispensation of Providence ought to begin; how quick or how slow it ought to be in its progress; and when it is to be completed. Many discoveries, beneficial to mankind, have been made in modern times. How absurd would it be to suppose the recency of *invention* a discovery an argument against its usefulness; or against the goodness of God in giving man the power of making it now, rather than at an earlier period! Every thing here is progressive. If at once, and in the beginning, man had received all the good things that a gracious Creator had destined for

for him, his life could not have been a state of probation; and we, having no desires ungratified, no faculties unimproved, and nothing further to hope or to fear, must have been equally incapable of activity and of happiness.

CHAP. II.

THE GOSPEL HISTORY IS TRUE.

THE gospel history being conveyed to us in writing, the only possible way in which it could be safely conveyed through the long succession of seventeen hundred years, its evidences must, in part, depend on human testimony. In some respects, however, they are peculiar, and differ from those of other histories. No circumstance of the life of Julius Cæsar; the battle of Pharsalia, for example, the destruction of the Nervii, or the invasion of Britain; is alluded to, so far as I know, in any writing previous

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to the birth of that commander : but many of the facts recorded in the gospel, though seemingly of far less magnitude, bear a striking resemblance to events foretold by Jewish prophets, who lived several hundred years before the birth of Christ. The particulars of Cesar's life, the speeches he made, and the great transactions he was engaged in, made no material alteration, except perhaps to the worse, in the manners or sentiments of mankind. But the things that were done, and the doctrines that were taught, by the supposed son of a carpenter of Judea, and by some fishermen his friends, produced a most important change, to the better, in human sentiments and manners ; a change diffused through many nations, and of which we at this day see and feel the consequences.

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THE evidences of the gospel, therefore, are to be treated somewhat differently from those of other historical records. I shall first consider it, merely as a portion of antient history. Secondly, I shall speak of it as the accomplishment of certain prophecies. And I shall afterwards inquire, whether it may not be further confirmed by the peculiar excellency of the knowledge we derive from it, as well as by the extraordinary changes introduced by it into the system of human affairs.

SECTION I.

The Gospel considered as a portion of ancient history.

AS a short preface to what I have to say on the evidence of the gospel, considered as a portion of ancient history, it may be proper to set down the following remarks on testimony.

It is natural for man to speak as he thinks; and it is easy too, like walking forward. One may walk backwards or sideways; but it is uneasy, and a sort of force upon nature: and the same thing is true of speaking or declaring what is contrary to one's belief. At least this is the general rule.

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Long practice in falsehood, or in walking sideways or backward, may no doubt render it easy; but it requires long practice to make it so.

WE naturally believe what others tell us. We trust the word of a man of whose honesty we have had experience; but we also credit testimony previous to experience; for children who have least experience are most credulous. It is from having experienced the dishonesty of men, and the motives that tempt them to falsify, that we come to distrust or disbelieve what they say.

In general, when we doubt a man's word, we have always one or other of these four reasons for it: we think, that what he says is incredible or improbable; or that there is some temptation or motive which inclines him in

the present case to violate truth; or that he is not a competent judge of the matter wherein he gives testimony; or perhaps we doubt his veracity now, because we have known him to be a deceiver formerly. If we have no reason to distrust his integrity; if we think him a competent judge of that which he affirms; if we know of no motive of vanity or interest that might incline him to falsify; and if he affirm nothing but what is credible and probable; we shall without scruple acquiesce in his declaration.

Our faith in testimony often rises to absolute certainty. That there are such town as Constantinople and Smyrna, and such countries as Asia, Africa, and America; that Cesar and Annibal were real men and great commanders, the one a Roman, the other a Carthaginian; that William of
Nor-

Normandy conquered England; that Charles I. was beheaded, &c.—every person, who knows any thing of history, accounts himself absolutely certain. For the testimonies that confirm these and the like truths are so many, so various, and so consistent, that we justly think it *impossible* they should be fictitious.

WHEN a number of persons, not acting in concert, having no interest to conceal what is true or affirm what is false, and competent judges of what they testify, concur in making the same report, it would be thought madness to disbelieve them. Even when three, or when two witnesses, separately examined, and who have had no opportunity to contrive a plan before hand, agree in their declaration, we believe them, though we have had no experience of their veracity;—because we
know,

know, that in such a case their testimonies would not be uniform, if they were not true.—In this way men have judged in all ages; and upon this principle the most important questions relating to life and property are decided: and of such decisions and judgments the general experience of mankind proves the utility and the rectitude.

AN impossible fact no testimony whatever, not even that of our own senses, would make us believe. If I were to see the same individual man double, or in two places at the same time, I should certainly think, not that it was so, but that something was wrong in my sight, or that the appearance might be owing to some peculiarity in the medium through which I saw it. When a fact is possible, and still more when it is not improbable, the

the testimony of a stranger would incline us to believe, unless we had reason to suspect him of a design to impose upon us.

MIRACULOUS facts are not to be ranked with impossibilities. There was a time, when the matter that composes my body was as void of life, as it will be when it shall have lain twenty years in the grave; when the elementary particles, whereof my eye is made up, could no more enable a percipient being to see, than they can now enable one to speak; and when that which forms the substance of this hand was as inert as a stone. Yet now, by the goodness of the Creator, the first lives, the last moves, and by means of the second I perceive light and colours. And if Almighty power can bring about all this gradually, by one particular succession of causes and effects, may
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not the same power perform it in an instant, and by the operation of other causes to us unknown? Or will the atheist say (and none who believes in God can doubt the possibility of miracles) that he himself knows every possible cause that can operate in the production of any effect? Or is he certain that there is no such thing in the universe as Almighty power?

To raise a dead man to life; to cure blindness with a touch; to remove lameness, or any other bodily imperfection, by speaking a word, are all miracles; but must all be as easy to the author of nature, or to any person commissioned by him for that purpose, as to give life to an embryo, make the eye an organ of sight, or cause vegetables to revive in the spring. And therefore, if a person declaring himself to be sent of God, or invested with
divine

divine power, and saying and doing what is worthy of such a commission, should perform miracles like these, mankind would have the best reason to believe, that his authority was really from heaven.

As the common people have neither time nor capacity for deep reasoning; and as a divine revelation of religion must be intended for all sorts of men, the vulgar as well as the learned, the poor as well as the rich; it is necessary, that the evidence of such a revelation should be of that kind which may command general attention, and convince men of all ranks and characters, and should therefore be level to every capacity. It would be easy, no doubt, for the Deity to convey his truths immediately to every man by inspiration, so as to make inquiry unnecessary, and doubt impossible. But
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this would not be consistent with man's free agency and moral probation; and this would be very unlike every other dispensation of Providence with respect to man, who, as he is endowed with rational faculties, feels that he is under an obligation to use and improve them. This would be to make him love religion, and believe in it, without leaving it in his power to do otherwise: and such faith, and such love, would be no mark of either a good disposition or a bad.—Now there is no kind of evidence, consistent with our moral probation and free agency, that is likely to command universal attention, and carry full conviction in religious matters to men of all ranks and capacities, except the evidence arising from miracles, or supernatural events.

ONE author has indeed affirmed, that miracles can be no evidence of
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any doctrine; because no testimony whatever can, in his opinion, render a miracle credible even in the lowest degree. But I need not quit the tract of my argument, for the sake of a paradox, so contrary to the natural dictates of rationality, and which has been unanswerably confuted by Dr Campbell in his *Dissertation on Miracles*. In fact, every event admits of proof from human testimony, which it is possible for a sufficient number of competent witnesses to see and to hear.

SOME things may seem to be supernatural, which are really not so: such are the tricks of the juggler; whereof when we are told the contrivance, we are surprised to find it so easy, and almost ashamed of having ever wondered at it. Some other things appear supernatural to those only who are ignorant of their causes: and such are

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many

many facts in electricity, magnetism, and other parts of experimental philosophy.

BUT the mighty works of our Saviour are quite of a different kind. To raise the dead to life, to cure the most violent disease by speaking a word, to walk on the surface of a stormy sea:—these, and many other things recorded in the gospel, are truly miraculous; and such as, to human apprehension, that power only can perform, which, having established the course of nature, is alone able to change it.

OF this sort of miracles the author of our religion not only wrought many, but also imparted to his apostles the power of doing the same. And, what was still more wonderful, if any thing could be more so, he himself, after having been crucified, in the presence of
a great

a great multitude, and pierced with a lance, and found to be dead, and after lying part of three days in the grave, arose to life, re-animated that body which had been mangled on the cross, passed forty days on earth after his resurrection, during which time he frequently conversed with his disciples, and at last, in open day, and while he was speaking to them visibly, ascended from the earth, till a cloud received him out of their sight. These miracles transcend all power but what is divine. So that, if we admit the gospel history to be true, we must believe, beyond a possibility of doubt, that our Lord was, what he declared himself to be, a person invested with divine power, and employed in a divine mission. The truth of the history may be proved from many considerations.

It might be proved from the existence, and singular nature, of the religion of Jesus. On the supposition that the gospel is true, the peculiar character of this religion, its present state, and the various revolutions it has undergone, may be easily accounted for: on the contrary supposition, nothing in the whole compass of human affairs is more unaccountable, than the rise and progress of Christianity. Its history may be traced from the present age up to that of the apostles. Since that period, down to these times, so many writers speak of this gospel, and concur in so many particulars concerning it, that there is not perhaps any other ancient record, for whose authenticity so many vouchers could be produced. And we know for certain, that many intelligent persons of the primitive church, who had the best opportunities of knowing the truth
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of this matter, and whose supreme concern it was to inquire into it, and not suffer themselves to be mistaken, believed and asserted the truth of the gospel, and suffered death in confirmation of their faith and testimony. Can any thing like this be urged in favour of Xenophon, Sallust, or Tacitus; whose authority, notwithstanding, the world is not much inclined, and in general has no great reason, to call in question?

HAD the evangelists written the history, and the apostles preached the doctrines, of a man who lived before they were born, or whom neither they nor their contemporaries had ever seen, their testimony would not perhaps have been above suspicion. But I shall not misrepresent the circumstances, or the conduct, of those extraordinary teachers, if I suppose them to have address-

fed their countrymen the Jews, who were the first hearers of the gospel, in words like these: ' We tell you of this
 ' man, our divine master, many things
 ' which ye yourselves know to be true;
 ' and nothing, in regard to which' ye
 ' may not, if ye candidly inquire, sa-
 ' tisfy yourselves by the testimony of
 ' creditable witnesses, who heard and
 ' saw what we affirm. From persisting
 ' in falsehood we have nothing to hope;
 ' and ye in detecting it can have nothing
 ' to fear. The power of the state is in
 ' your hands: exert yourselves to the
 ' utmost; and confute us if ye can.'
 Suppose an address of this kind to be
 made to the French nation, concerning
 a history of certain well known events
 that had happened in France; and sup-
 pose the only answer returned by pub-
 lic authority to be as follows: ' On the
 ' subject ye mention we command you
 ' and your adherents to be silent on
 ' pain

‘pain of death:’—of which party, let me ask, would the world judge most favourably? Would it not be said, that nothing could be more fair, than what is declared on the one side; and that on the other there at once appeared invincible prejudice and implacable malignity?

BUT what motives could those Jews have to wish the gospel might be false, and to shut their eyes against the light with so much obstinacy and perseverance? Motives they had of the most cogent nature; motives, which among any people it might be difficult to prevail against, but which from the inherent perverseness of the Jewish nation could hardly fail to derive insurmountable strength.

FOR first, if the Jewish rulers, after the death of our Lord, had acknowledged

ledged him to be the Messiah, they must also have acknowledged themselves the perpetrators of the most dreadful crime that ever disgraced a nation; and from rulers so haughty a confession so humiliating could hardly be looked for. Nor, secondly, was it to be expected, that they could bear to think of the abrogation of the law of Moses, which had subsisted so long; which did so much honour to their nation, temple, and capital city; which taught them to consider themselves as God's peculiar people; and from which their priests, scribes, and elders, who we find were the most inveterate enemies of the new religion, derived so many dignities and emoluments.

THEY might also, thirdly, from many political considerations, be unwilling to receive the gospel, and inclined to look on the men who taught it as the
enemies

enemies of their country. For if the Messiah was now come, then all their flattering hopes of a glorious conqueror, who should rescue them from the Roman yoke, and exalt them above all nations, were at an end for ever. And then they might be apprehensive, that the Romans, some of whom, as we learn from Tacitus and Suetonius, knew that a triumphant deliverer from Judea was about this time expected, would be emboldened, on hearing that Rome had now nothing to fear from that quarter, to oppress them more rigorously, and even 'to take away' (as they themselves emphatically expressed it) 'their place and nation *.' Whether the Romans were in any degree intimidated by what they had heard of the Jewish prophecies concerning Messiah, is not known: but that they might

* See John xi. 48.

might be so, and had reason to be so, it was natural enough for a Jew to suppose; especially if he knew, as he probably would know, that on the subject of prophecy the Romans were not a little superstitious. How much Herod dreaded the coming of the Messiah, appears from his murder of the innocents: an event, which must have been well known at Rome; if it be true, as Macrobius relates, that Augustus, on hearing of it, and that one of Herod's sons had suffered in the massacre, facetiously observed, that it was better to be the swine than the son * of Herod. Some however suppose, on the authority of Josephus, that Herod had not then a son under two years of age; and that the emperor's sarcasm was more probably occasioned by Herod's cruelty in putting to death Aristobulus.

lus and Alexander his two sons by Mariamne, and his son Antipater for an alledged conspiracy against his father's life. But this is of little importance in the present argument.

IN a word; if it be in the power of prejudice, of pride, of ambition, of religious zeal, or of national partiality, to make men averse to the reception of any system of opinions, we need not wonder at the obstinacy of the Jewish rulers. Their passions, generally violent, were all in arms, and in the highest degree exasperated, against Christ and his religion. That so many of that nation should have been his disciples, is therefore more wonderful, than that so many should have opposed him. In modern times it cannot apparently be the interest of any, hardened sinners excepted, that the gospel should not be true. Yet even in these days,
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and in the most enlightened nations, a spirit of opposition to the gospel, and a want of candour with regard to its doctrines and evidence, are by no means uncommon.

+ If such was the temper of the Jewish rulers ; and if we may warrantably suspect them to have been as capable of falsehood, as they certainly were of injustice and cruelty ; is it not strange, that the events recorded in the gospel were not denied by any contemporary authority ? Yet this is the fact : for such authorities, if they had ever appeared, must have been preserved, and argued from by the enemies of the gospel, and replied to in the writings of Christians. And how is this fact to be accounted for ! In no other way, I presume, than by supposing, that in Judea the particulars of our Saviour's life were so well known, that no contradictory

tradictory record would have obtained credit. And to publish such a thing, without being able to make the nation believe it would have been an injury to their own cause. Their best policy therefore was, to keep up the passions and prejudices of the people, to encourage a spirit of persecution, to confine themselves to violent and general assertions, and to avoid and discountenance minute inquiry. The truth is, that the antient unbelievers never denied the miracles of Jesus; they imputed them to magick or the power of the devil: a doctrine, which our Lord himself condescended to refute; and of which the modern infidel, as nobody now believes in magick, will not seek to avail himself. †

BUT prejudice and passion subside at last, and leave the mind at leisure for calm investigation. If then the

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particulars

particulars of our Saviour's life had been as well known as is here supposed, must not the Jews, when the present ferment was over, have come to their senses, and acknowledged the truth? That many of them did so, is certain. But from other histories, as well as that of the Jews, we learn, that when the passions of men are thoroughly inflamed, by matters of great and general concern, it may require the operation of years to cool them. And let it be observed, that the Jews had not now much time left for reflection and leisure. The generation that put our Lord to death had not passed away, when the troubles of Judea began; and in less than forty years after the crucifixion, Jerusalem was levelled with the ground, the greater part of the nation exterminated, and the rest scattered abroad throughout the Roman empire.

BUT,

BUT, if their rulers were as much exasperated against the new religion, as has been supposed, why it may be asked, did they not destroy it at once, by putting all the apostles to death? Stephen indeed they stoned in a transport of fury, and Herod murdered James the brother of John: but Peter, and Paul, and others, were permitted to live; and in a little time we find there was a church in Jerusalem, and another in Antioch. How is this to be reconciled with what is said above of the extreme obstinacy and violence of the Jewish rulers?

It may be answered, that these things were so ordered by an overruling providence, who having determined that the religion of Christ should not be destroyed, miraculously interposed for a time in the preservation of his ministers. If this answer be deem-

ed insufficient, the following considerations are submitted to the reader.

FIRST ; the Jews could have no reason to hope, that, by putting to death all the apostles, or all the Christians, that came in their way, they should annihilate Christianity : there might be others whom they had never heard of ; for our Saviour, during his abode on earth, had many disciples ; five hundred are mentioned by St Paul as witnesses of his resurrection ; and on the day of Pentecost three thousand were converted, and five thousand a few days after.—Secondly ; Peter and Paul, though for a time permitted to live, did not live in peace, but underwent cruel persecution ; and the former, if he had not by miracle escaped, would have been murdered by Herod, as James was.—Thirdly ; Several of the apostles, soon after the descent of
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the Holy Ghost, left Jerusalem, and went to preach else where.—Fourthly ; It may be presumed that the Christians of that age were quiet and inoffensive ; we know indeed for certain that they were so : on the other hand they might be afraid to declare open war against them, as not knowing how numerous they might be ; and dreading also, if they should drive matters to extremity, the effects of that influence, which the apostles from time to time acquired among the common people. The most oppressive tyrants, even when armed with absolute authority, are not without fears of this kind : how much more timorous must a tyrannical aristocracy have been, that was destitute of mutual confidence, and over-awed by the Roman power !

To which I may add, fifthly, That the advice given by Gamaliel in the
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council, ' Refrain from these men,
' and let them alone ; (for if this
' counsel or this work be of men, it
' will come to nought ; but if it be of
' God, ye cannot overthrow it;) left
' haply ye be found even to fight
' against God : ' I say, this advice had
great weight with them ; which indeed
it deserved to have, as a better could
not have been given. The event has
proved, that Gamaliel was a wise, as
well as a pious man : and what was
thus so seasonably spoken to the first
enemies of the gospel, may with equal
propriety be addressed to them who
oppose it in these latter days.

IN antient writings, as there is no-
thing to invalidate the gospel history,
so there are several testimonies to con-
firm it. That Christ suffered under
Pontius Pilate, and was the founder of
the sect of Christians, is attested by
Tacitus,

Tacitus, and admitted, I think, by all writers on the subject. Facts recorded in the New Testament, concerning Herod, Pilate, Festus, and Felix, are mentioned by Josephus, and in the Jewish Talmud. And the new star that shone on the nativity, the earthquake and preternatural darkness that accompanied the crucifixion, and the massacre of the innocents by Herod, are with some reason supposed to have been mentioned by Pagan authors, as well as by the evangelists*. This, however, is not affirmed as certain; nor does any material part of the evidence depend upon it.

It is true, that the Roman writers of that time, both historians and philosophers, seem to have been very ignorant

* See Grotius de ver. rel. Christ. lib. III. 14. and Macrob. Sat. lib. II. 4.

norant of our Saviour's history and doctrine, and to have had no curiosity to know either. Is this wonderful? It will not appear so to him who considers the distance of Judea from Rome, and the state of navigation in those days; the contemptuous opinion which the Romans, the masters of the world, entertained, both of the national character, and of the religion of the Jews; the proud spirit of the heathen philosophy, so directly repugnant to that humble and docile disposition, which is required of every disciple of Christ; the extreme dissimilitude between a practical religion, whose sole aim is to purify the soul and prepare it for heaven, and a philosophy framed chiefly for the purpose of dispute and rhetorical declamation; the mean condition, and unassuming manners, of the publishers of the gospel, so unlike the pomp and pedantry of the Epicureans

reans and the Stoicks: and above all, perhaps, that crucifixion, which the author of Christianity was known to have undergone, and which his followers avowed and gloried in; but which, according to the modes of thinking that then universally prevailed through † all the rest of the Roman empire as well as in Judea, was a death of so much ignominy, that no person was thought likely to suffer it, who had, or deserved to have, any reputation in the world. He who considers these things; and who knows the state of learning at that time, the characters of those who were reputed learned, and the real nature of the Christian religion, may indeed wonder to hear that so many were converted to the faith; but will not wonder to find, that neither Seneca nor Epictetus, the elder nor the younger Pliny, Tacitus nor Marcus Aurelius were among the number. See this

X this matter illustrated, with great precision and elegance, in the fourth chapter of Disquisitions (by Sir David Dalrymple) concerning the antiquities of the Christian church*.

SOME of the first Christians, whose writings are still extant, speak of the gospels as the work of those evangelists whose names they bear. And they had good opportunities of information in this particular, as well as of comparing the gospel history with the most authentick traditions concerning the persons and events therein recorded: Origen, who was born in the second century, being contemporary with Irenæus, who was the disciple of Polycarp, who had been the disciple of the apostle John, and personally acquainted with others of the early Christians. Is it to be

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* See also Bishop Porteus's Sermons, Ser. X.

be imagined, that those men would not be inquisitive about the truth of a religion, for which they had ground to believe, that they were likely to suffer persecution and martyrdom? If we suppose ourselves in their situation, with the same alarming view before us, and with the same means of knowledge they had, we shall see that it is not possible for a man of common understanding to do, and to suffer, what they did and suffered, unless he firmly believe the doctrine he maintains, and know that he has good reason to believe it.

To all this we may add, that the Epistles, which are of the same age with the historical part of the New Testament, appear evidently to have been written by men who were in earnest in what they wrote, and to be
adapted

adapted to real occurrences and circumstances of the times.

THE style, too, of the gospel bears intrinsic evidence of its truth. We find there no appearance of artifice or of party-spirit ; no attempts to exaggerate on the one hand, or depreciate on the other ; no remarks thrown in to anticipate objections ; nothing of that caution, which never fails to distinguish the testimony of those who are conscious of imposture ; no endeavour to reconcile the reader's mind to what may be extraordinary in the narrative : all is fair, candid, and simple : the historians make no reflections of their own, but confine themselves to matter of fact, that is, to what they heard and saw ; and honestly record their own mistakes and faults, as well as the other particulars of the story.

FOR

FOR a more full display of some of these arguments, as well as for other things that might be mentioned on this head, the reader, till he have leisure to peruse more voluminous writings, may consult Addison's short but elegant Treatise of the Christian religion. Whence it will appear, that the gospel history is at least as well vouch-ed as any other of that time; and that we have as good reason to believe what the New Testament records of the birth, life, miracles, death and doctrine of Christ, as to believe the battle of Cannæ, the assassination of Julius Cesar or any other antient fact. Nay we have still extant among us two visible proofs, not hitherto mentioned, of the truth of the gospel, I mean the two Sacraments; which are known to have been in the Christian church from the beginning, and the origin of which it

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would

would not be easy to account for, on the supposition that the gospel is not true. These institutions, beside other excellent purposes which they serve, will continue to bear testimony to the truth of our religion, to the end of the world.

IF it be said, that the apostles might have invented what they record of these institutions, as well as other particulars of the history; I shall only answer at present, (for their veracity will be considered hereafter) that two simple rites, which can afford no gratification to avarice, ambition, or sensuality, and whose chief end is to promote humility, piety, and purity of heart, could hardly have been the contrivance of men, who had determined, as those who reject their testimony must believe, to live and die impostors and hypocrites.

crites. For the institution of these rites is a matter in which they could not have been imposed on. They could not have fancied, that they had received a commission to baptize the nations, if they had received no such commission: they could not have believed that they were present at the celebration of the first supper, if they had not been present.

BUT are not those parts of the Roman story, above alluded to, more probable in themselves, than the gospel history? Are not the former agreeable to the common course of human affairs; and is not the latter a recital of events, whereof many are extraordinary, and unlike any thing we have ever seen? Permit me to ask in return, whether, if mankind were told, and prevailed on to believe, that a revela-

tion of the Divine will was to be made from heaven, it would not be natural for them to expect something extraordinary? Would they not have reason to say, 'God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are our ways his ways? As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are his ways higher than our ways, and his thoughts than our thoughts. This revelation, being a supernatural thing, will probably, nay must certainly, be attended with supernatural circumstances.' In fact, the gospel history, considered as the account of a divine revelation, is not less probable, than the Roman story considered as a narrative of the works of men. From what we know of the weakness, wickedness and other peculiarities of the human character, we admit the probability of what is recorded concerning Annibal and Cesar :

far: and from what we know, with equal certainty, of the wisdom, power, and goodness of God, we admit the probability of the sacred history. To our bodily eyes the Divine Essence and the human soul are equally invisible: the nature of both we discover in their works; from which it is not more evident, that man is wicked and weak, than that God is wise, almighty, and good.

HAD there been nothing extraordinary in the life and doctrine of Jesus, it would have supplied an argument of no little weight against his divine mission. This man, it might have been objected, gives out, that he is sent of God, that he speaks by inspiration, and that his works are the works of divine power. And yet he does and says nothing but what an ordinary man

might say and do ; nor has any thing ever happened to him beyond the common occurrences of life. Why then should we believe, that either his wisdom or his power is superior to that of other men ? To this objection, had it been founded in fact, it would not, I apprehend, have been easy to frame an answer. The supernatural events, therefore, recorded in the gospel, unless they could be proved to be either unworthy of God, or impossible in themselves, (which no person will ever affirm who knows what they are), will be found to add to its credibility ; and that in the same proportion nearly, in which supernatural events, related of an ordinary man, would take away from the credit of the historian who should relate them.

THE probability, that the gospel may be true, is also inferred from the utter
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improbability that it should be false. It is, as will be more particularly remarked in the sequel, like nothing of human contrivance. The perfection of its morality transcends the best efforts of human wisdom: the character of its Founder is far superior to that of a mere man: and it will not be said, that his apostles can be compared to any other fishermen, or any other teachers, that ever were heard of. The views, displayed in the gospel, of the divine dispensations with respect to the human race, are such as, before the commencement of our Saviour's ministry, had never entered into the mind of man. To believe all this to be a mere human fable, requires a degree of credulity, which in the ordinary affairs of life would do a man little credit: it is like believing, that a first-rate ship of war might have been
been.

been the work and the invention of a child.

HAD the apostles intended an imposture, there would not have been so many of them. Of twelve persons employed in promulgating a fable, and wandering with that purpose into different parts of the earth, it is not to be expected that, in defiance of persecution and death, all would to the end persevere in the same declaration. But all the apostles did persevere. One indeed was a traitor:—and what became of him? At a time, when from man he had every thing to hope, and nothing to fear; his master being condemned, his former associates dispersed and terrified, and himself patronised by the Jewish rulers; this traitor was seized with remorse, confessed that he had betrayed innocent blood; returned the wages of iniquity to those
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from whom he had received it and in despair 'departed, and went and hanged himself.' All this is natural and probable, on the supposition that the gospel is true ; on the contrary supposition, it is incredible and impossible.

SECTION II.

THE SUBJECT CONTINUED.

Of the argument from prophecy.

THE gospel history is, in many particulars, an accomplishment of certain prophecies, preserved as sacred by the Jews themselves, and committed to writing several hundred years before our Saviour was born. That prophecy is possible, must be admitted by all who admit the possibility of other miracles, that is, by all who acknowledge the power and omniscience of the Deity. And that, in former times, and previously to the last and great manifestation of divine truth,

truth, prophecy and other miracles might have been expedient or necessary, though now they are so no longer, it would be very presumptuous to deny.

IN the history of the Old Testament it appears, that, from the earliest ages, an expectation had prevailed, among the Jews and their forefathers, that an extraordinary person, called by some of the prophets the MESSIAH, that is, the ANOINTED, or the CHRIST, would at one time or other appear on earth, and bring about a very important change in the condition of the Jews, and of all other nations. The ancient prophecies that seem to relate to this Person, when taken separately, may to a superficial view appear to have less significancy, than Christians ascribe to them. But he, who compares them together, and observes, how they refer to,

to, and illustrate, and often imitate the language, and sometimes copy the words of, one another, will be struck with their consistency and connection ; and astonished to find so many of them, notwithstanding the variety and apparent incongruity of the circumstances foretold, so exactly fulfilled in the history of the birth, life death, and religion, of Jesus of Nazareth.

Soon after the fall, it was foretold, of this Great Person*, that he should be in a peculiar sense the son of a woman ; that from the malignity of the devil he should be a sufferer, but that he should bring destruction on that evil spirit. Two thousand years after, it was foretold to Abraham, that this person should be of the posterity of Isaac, and a blessing to all nations ; and
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* Genesis III. 15. Gerard's Sermons, 4.
5. 6.

it was afterwards predicted, that he should be of the tribe of Judah and family of David, and be born of a virgin in the town of Bethlehem. It was foretold, by the patriarch Israel, that till he should come, the Jewish government would not be subverted; and by the prophet Daniel the exact time of his death is foretold, as Mr Ferguson has proved in the most satisfactory manner. It was foretold, that this Messiah, this triumphant prince and Saviour, should die a violent death, as a malefactor, not for any sin of his own, but for the sins of mankind; and that soon after his death the city and temple of Jerusalem would be destroyed: but, notwithstanding this ignominious death, it was foretold, that his dominion should be over all nations, and without end, that he should speak peace to the heathen, and introduce a new dispensation of things, tending to,

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and

and terminating in, peace and happiness eternal.

It was foretold, that he should preach good tidings to the poor, and perform many miracles for the alleviation of human infirmity ; particularly, that he should give sight to the blind, speech to the dumb, hearing to the deaf, and the perfect use of their limbs to the lame. It was foretold, that he should be sold for thirty pieces of silver, and that with this money a potter's field should be bought ; that he should be scourged, buffeted, and spit upon ; that he should be meek and silent before his accusers ; that his hands and feet should be pierced, but that his bones should not be broken ; that gall and vinegar should be offered him to drink ; that lots should be cast for his garments ; that he should be buried in a rich man's sepulchre ; and that he
should

should rise again without seeing corruption. How far these predictions were verified in Jesus, no person needs be informed who has read the New Testament. And in him alone they were verified, and in no other man that ever appeared on the earth.

BUT are all these predictions applied with equal plainness by the prophets to the Messiah? They are not: some are more explicit and positive, others only insinuated. And if we had no other evidence of the truth of our religion, I grant that this would be defective. But, when we take a general view of the Old and New Testaments, and observe, that the one is, as it were, a completion of the other; and that the revelations recorded in both, though consisting of many parts, and delivered by different authors, and in different ages, have the same tendency, and the

most perfect unity of design:—when we reflect, that these prophecies would mean nothing if they were not fulfilled in Jesus, but that, as fulfilled in him, they have a most important meaning; and that the prophets, who uttered them, predicted several other things that have come to pass, particularly concerning Tyre and Egypt, Cyrus and Babylon, and the state of the Jews after their dispersion by the Romans:—and, which is still more to the present purpose, when we find our Saviour and his apostles, whose veracity and supernatural knowledge we can prove *by other evidence*, appealing to these prophecies, and thereby justifying their doctrine and conduct, and thereby often silencing and converting Jews, who had studied the prophets, and acknowledged their authenticity:—in a word, when we join this to the other proofs of our religion, we become sensible, that

that the argument from prophecy has a force in it which cannot fail to make a strong impression on every candid and considerate mind. But let not the adversary triumph, though to him this argument should not appear satisfactory: for the truth of our religion might be proved, though we were to omit this part of the evidence. Yet this has its use, in confirming the faith of the inquisitive Christian: and this has been singularly useful, in the conversion of the modern infidel, as well as of the ancient Jew. See Bishop Burnet's account of the death of the Earl of Rochester.

THE better sort of the ancient philosophers admitted, that certain offices of goodwill were due to all men. But universal benevolence, or a desire to promote the virtue and happiness of all men, seems not to have been prevalent

either among them, or among the Jews. Love to one's country is celebrated by the Greek and Roman writers as a sublime virtue: but it was such a love, as prompted men to nothing more, than to take care of the interests of their own community, with little or no concern for those of other nations. In this respect the Jews were as narrow-minded as any people could be: they despised and hated all other nations; although the morality of Moses and the prophets ought to have given them a more liberal way of thinking. Into the mind of a Jew, therefore, how could it enter, except by supernatural means, that the promised Prince and Messiah, from whom so many great things were expected in behalf of the Jewish nation, should also be a 'light to lighten the Gentiles;' and that the influence of his power and benignity, as the deliverer of mankind, should

should be universal and eternal? This magnificent idea is familiar to us, because we derive it from Holy Writ; but how remote it must have been from the minds of men unaided by revelation, may appear from this, that there is no trace of it in any pagan author;—except, perhaps, in the fourth eclogue of Virgil: and that poem is generally thought to have been composed from some fragments of antient prophecy, probably of Isaiah, which had come, we know not how, into the hands of the great Roman poet.

Of several other prophecies it would not be difficult to show, that, considering the opinions and temper of the Jews, they are wholly unaccountable, unless we suppose them to have been the dictates of inspiration. Such is that memorable one of Zechariah, afterwards literally fulfilled in all its parts:

parts: ' Rejoice greatly, O daughter
' of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jeru-
' salem: behold, thy king cometh unto
' thee: he is just, and having salva-
' tion; lowly, and riding upon an ass,
' and upon a colt, the foal of an ass.'
Was this likely to happen? Was it
thus, that kings and conquerors used
to enter their capital cities? Was it
with this humble equipage that the
Jews expected their glorious and tri-
umphant Messiah would appear? Yet
thus he did appear; infinitely more
triumphant and glorious, than if he
had been what they expected.

BEFORE I leave the subject of pro-
phesy, let me subjoin a remark, which
is perhaps too early introduced, but
which, when the veracity of the apos-
tles shall have been evinced from other
topics, will be found to have great
weight in the argument. It is, that
there

there are also, in the New Testament, predictions, which have been plainly accomplished. Such is our Lord's prophecy, that he should be betrayed, delivered to the Gentiles, insulted, and crucified, and should rise from the dead on the third day : events, which fell out accordingly ; but of which, at the time he foretold them, one seemed to be impossible, and the others very improbable. And such is that, which he so particularly delivered concerning Peter's momentary apostasy ; a circumstance which, considering the zeal, the generosity, and the intrepidity of that apostle, was most unlikely, and which Peter himself, notwithstanding his veneration for his master, did not believe to be possible, till he found it had happened. I may add, that Peter's exemplary penitence, and subsequent conduct, when viewed in a connection with the peculiarity of his character, form

form a striking proof, that his faith was equally well-founded and sincere and that he 'knew in whom he believed.'

THOSE other predictions, that have been supposed to allude to the church of Rome, or to the Mahometan imposture, I do not touch upon ; because the world has not yet perhaps seen their completion. But that of the destruction of Jerusalem must not be overlooked ; as it was so soon and in so signal a manner verified ; and as it related to an event, which, when our Saviour foretold it, the Jews being then at peace with the Romans, and apparently reconciled to their yoke, no human wisdom could have foreseen. So great is the resemblance between this prophecy and the calamities that followed, as these are recorded by Flavius Josephus, who had the best opportunities

portunities of information, being himself present at the siege;—so like, I say, is the prediction to the event, that one would not be surprised, if the infidel were to suspect, that the event must have been prior to the prediction. But it is somewhat remarkable, that Matthew, Mark, and Luke, who have recorded this prophecy, died before the destruction of Jerusalem, and that John, who survived it, has not recorded the prophecy. †

I SHALL first set down some parts of this prophecy, introduced with a prediction of Daniel; and secondly, I shall quote some passages from Josephus, and one sentence from Tacitus, relating to the events whereby those predictions seem plainly to have been accomplished.

‘ AFTER

‘ AFTER threescore and two weeks,’
says Daniel, ‘ Messiah shall be cut off,
‘ —and the people of the prince that
‘ shall come shall destroy the city and
‘ the sanctuary ; and the end thereof
‘ shall be with a flood, and unto the
‘ end of the war desolations are deter-
‘ mined.’

‘ SEEST thou these great buildings,’
says our Saviour, speaking of the temple ? ‘ There shall not be left one stone
‘ upon another, that shall not be
‘ thrown down.—The days shall come
‘ upon thee, (O Jerusalem) when thine
‘ enemies shall cast a trench about
‘ thee, and keep thee in on every side,
‘ and shall lay thee even with the
‘ ground, and shall not leave thee one
‘ stone upon another.—And great
‘ earthquakes shall be in divers places,
‘ and famines and pestilences and fear-
‘ ful sights ; and great signs shall there
‘ be

'be from heaven.—There shall be
 'great tribulation, such as never hap-
 'pened from the beginning of the
 'world to this time.—They shall fall
 'by the edge of the sword, and shall
 'be led away captive into all nations :
 'and Jerusalem shall be trodden down
 'of the Gentiles—This generation
 'shall not pass, till all these things be
 'fulfilled.'

THE reader may compare this pro-
 phesy with the following extracts ; the
 fifth of which is from Tacitus, the rest
 from Josephus.

1. 'TITUS commanded his soldiers
 'to dig up the foundations of both the
 'city and the temple.'

2. 'VESPASIAN's army compassed
 'the city round about with a wall of
 'thirty-nine furlongs, having on it
 K 'thirteen

‘thirteen towers, and kept them in on
‘every side; and so made it impossible
‘for the Jews within the city to ef-
‘cape.’

3. ‘TITUS having commanded his
‘soldiers to dig up the city, this was
‘so completely done, by levelling the
‘whole compass of it, except three
‘towers, that they who came to see it
‘were persuaded it could never be
‘built again.’

4. ‘IN the times of Claudius and
‘Nero, (a few years before the de-
‘struction of Jerusalem), ‘there happen-
‘ed in Judea a prodigious tempest,
‘and vehement winds with rain, and
‘dreadful lightning and thunder, and
‘roarings of the trembling earth.’

5. ‘ARMIES seemed to encounter,
‘and weapons to glitter, in the sky;
‘the

‘ the temple seemed to blaze with fire
‘ issuing from the clouds ; and a voice
‘ more than human was heard, declar-
‘ ing that the deities were quitting the
‘ place, which was attended with the
‘ sound of a great motion, as of per-
‘ sons going away.’

6. ‘ THE great gate of the temple,
(which twenty men could scarcely shut,
and which was secured by bolts and
bars,) ‘ was seen to open of its own
‘ accord: a sword appeared hanging
‘ over the city: a comet was seen point-
‘ ing down upon it for a whole year
‘ together. Before the sun went down,
‘ there appeared armies in battle-array,
‘ and chariots compassing the country,
‘ and investing the cities: a thing so
‘ strange, that it would pass for a fable,
‘ were there not men living to attest
‘ it.

7. 'NEVER was any nation more wicked, nor ever did a city suffer as they did.—All the miseries that mankind had suffered from the beginning of the world were not to be compared with those that the Jewish nation did then suffer. The number of captives was ninety-seven thousand. Titus sent many to Egypt, and most of them he dispersed into the Roman provinces*.'

IN Jerusalem, during the siege, there perished by famine, disease, and the sword, six hundred thousand, according to Suetonius; eleven hundred thousand, according to Josephus and Jornandes. And not long after, a general persecution of the Jews took place throughout the Roman empire.—All these

* See Whitby, quoted by West, in his Observations on the history and evidences of the resurrection of Jesus Christ; p. 380. edit. 5.

these things came to pass within the space of forty years after the death of our Saviour; so that the generation, which was on earth when he uttered this memorable prophecy, had not passed away, when it was in all its parts accomplished.

THIS extraordinary revolution has had consequences not less extraordinary. Ever since the period I speak of, the Jews have been dispersed through all nations, without obtaining a regular establishment in any; have been generally despised wherever they went; have been without a king, without a prince, and without a sacrifice: and yet have not lost their religion, nor been incorporated with the gentiles among whom they wander; but still remain a distinct people. Has such been the fate of any other nation? Could this, then, have been foreseen

or foretold, except by supernatural means? Yet of them this was foretold by Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Moses. Indeed the whole history of this people, before their dispersion by Titus and since, bears irrefragable testimony to the truth of both the Old Testament and the New. See Addison's remarks on it, in the four hundred and ninety-fifth paper of the *Spectator* *.—So much for prophecy. The argument arising from the excellency, and singular nature, of the Christian doctrine, will be considered by and by.

* See also Butler's Analogy, part II. chap. 7.

SECTION III.

THE SUBJECT CONTINUED.

The faith of the first disciples was the effect, not of weakness, but of well-grounded conviction.

THE historical part of the New Testament was written by men, who were eye-witnesses of many of the facts they relate, and had the rest from the authentick information of eye-witnesses. Those men either DID NOT BELIEVE what they wrote, or DID BELIEVE it.

I. If they did not believe what they wrote, they were impostors, and wanted

ed to deceive the world. Now men never form a plan of that nature, unless with a view to gain some end ; that is, to obtain some good real or imaginary. For it is inconceivable, that a rational being should give himself the trouble to invent an imposture, and support it through life ; a work of great difficulty, and, in a case like that before us, of the greatest danger ; in order to draw down mischief upon himself : and it is not more probable, that he should do all this by chance, and without any purpose or intention whatever. When Pfalmanaazer forged his fable of the island Formosa, can we imagine that he had no meaning in it, or that by so doing he intended to hurt his own interest ? Is it not more likely, that he hoped to make his fortune by it ? What then was the motive, that could induce the apostles to deceive mankind ? what fortune did

did they hope to make? what good, real or imaginary, could they have in view, if they were conscious, that what they affirmed was falsehood?

CERTAIN it is, that, when their Lord left them, they could no longer expect to advance their temporal interest, by adhering to his cause. On the contrary, they were told from the first, and, after his death, they knew and believed, that persecution and martyrdom would be their lot in this world; and, as their Jewish education must have taught them that God is just and holy, they, knowing themselves to be deceivers, could entertain no hope with respect to the next. And this must equally have been the state of their mind, whether with the Pharisees they believed a future life, or with the Sadducees denied it. Surely, the certain prospect of persecution here,
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with no hope of reward, or with the apprehension of punishment, hereafter, can never be the motive that tempts men to falsify. Present gain might tempt the covetous, present power the ambitious, or present pleasure the sensual; and a delusive hope of future pleasure or power might tempt the enthusiast. But, where none of these temptations existed; and, with respect to the apostles, it is certain, that none of them did or could exist; what was there in nature, or in the human imagination, that could induce them, in support of a lie, to encounter a life of pain and poverty, persecution and scorn! All the impostors that ever appeared on earth aimed at the acquisition of temporal advantages, of pleasure, wealth, or power: and indeed it is hard to conceive, what other motives could induce a rational being to become an impostor. And, with these allure-

allurements in their eye, we too often find that men can harden themselves, for a time at least, against the terrors of a life to come.

WILL it be said, that the apostles intended, by an imposture, merely to distinguish themselves, and acquire fame? This could not be their intention. All their doctrines have a tendency to raise the mind above the present world, and make it superior to every consideration of that sort. The love of fame is not that universal passion which Dr. Young supposes it to be. They who have conversed with many people, of different conditions and characters, must have found, that the greater part of mankind have no idea of such a passion. Nor is the love of distinction so strong in any breast, as to make a man expose himself knowingly to perdition and infamy
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in order to obtain it. Let it be observed too, that the first apostles were men of mean condition, mean education, and mean employment, and most of them considerably advanced in years. In the minds of such men we never see the love of fame predominant; though in such minds we often see the love of a fair character prevail, which, however, most men know is not to be acquired by dishonesty and falsehood.

WHEN men resolve to set an imposture on foot, they must have some reason to expect success in it: because a detection is in all cases dangerous, and may in many be fatal. The juggler knows, that his audience are credulous, and more willing to wonder than to inquire: he knows too, that some of them are his confederates, and that far the greater number are ready to take
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his part against those, who by their impertinent curiosity or unbelief may be inclined to interrupt the entertainment. Pſalmanaazar was in no danger of detection; his island being little known, and at a great distance. He contrived a probable tale; and, to make it the more probable, he did what he knew nobody would ſuſpect him of having done, becauſe no one man had ever done ſo before,—he invented a new language. In fact, though at firſt ſome doubted, he was never detected; his fable obtained credit for more than half a century; and it was his own voluntary confeſſion, the effect of ſincere though late repentance, that let the world into the ſecret.

Now ſuppoſe a few illiterate fiſhermen to contrive a new religion, different from all others; and endeavour to obtrude it on mankind, in oppoſi-

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tion to the temporal interests of their immediate rulers, and to all the prejudices, the passions, the power, the learning, the philosophy, and the eloquence, of an enlightened and inquisitive age; what chance would they have to succeed in the imposture! How is it possible, that they should entertain any hope of success at all! The thing is impossible. And therefore the apostles must have certainly known, that their religion was from heaven, and would be supported by supernatural means;—which actually happened to be the case. For on no other supposition can the extraordinary success of their ministry be accounted for.

A DISPOSITION to falsify and deceive is a criminal passion, that never appears single or solitary in the mind. Other evil passions never fail to accompany this; for where the love of truth

truth is not, virtue cannot be. But the apostles, after their conversion, were patterns of every virtue; of humility, patience, benevolence, piety, and the most amiable simplicity of manners: virtues, which never did, and never can, meet in the character of a deceiver. Lying makes a man infamous; which it would not do, if the world did not know by the experience of all ages, that from him who is inclined to that practice no good is to be expected.—I may add, that the virtues above mentioned, exemplified as they uniformly were in all the apostles, must have been the effect, not so much of natural disposition, for the apostles were in other respects of different characters, as of that divine grace and truth, with which they were equally and uniformly enlightened.



THE first preachers of the gospel taught men to subdue all irregular desires of pleasure, wealth and power, and to suppress every tendency of the heart to pride vanity, and vain glory. Had they themselves been actuated by such desires or tendencies, their conduct must have belied their doctrine. But no two things can be more consistent, than the doctrine and practice of the apostles : they taught what they practised, they practised what they taught ; and through life, and at death, their whole behaviour was uniform.

By what they taught they could never hope to make themselves popular, either in the higher or in the lower ranks of life ; for they flattered no human vice, but absolutely prohibited all. Among the vulgar they met with no little opposition, from prejudice, want of sense, and brutal manners.

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From the learned, of their own or of other countries, they could expect no indulgence; because the religion they introduced was in most things directly opposite to the spirit of pagan philosophy, as well as to the tenets and temper of the Jewish sectaries. And from the Roman emperors, who in those days might be called the sovereigns of the world, what but persecution could that man look for, who was to deny their deification, and refuse to pay them divine honours: a prerogative, whereof those proud potentates too well knew the value to permit it to be wrested from them with impunity; but which, however, was at last, though not with impunity, wrested from them, in consequence of the preaching of a few unlettered fishermen from Judea.

THOUGH the apostles did not, as some enthusiasts have done, provoke persecution, but exerted on all proper occasions a becoming prudence, yet self-interest cannot be said to have determined their conduct in a single instance. On the contrary, nothing is more evident, from their history and writings, than that, after the commencement of their ministry, the business of their lives was, to promote the glory of God, and make men superior both to the adversities and prosperities of this life, and happy in that which is to come. And this they did, not by recommending, like the Stoicks, an unnatural and impracticable insensibility, or a stern resolution to submit to that which cannot be resisted; but by teaching, that the evils incident to this state of trial are all intended, by the merciful father of mankind, as paternal admonitions, or as opportunities of

of calling forth and exercising those virtues, which are necessary to prepare us for the enjoyment of future reward.

AND let it not be forgotten, that they had been educated in the principles and prejudices of the Jews ; a nation at that time universally despised, and, if we admit the testimony of their countryman Josephus, as wicked as any that ever was on the earth ; in spite of the advantages they ought to have derived from Moses, and their other moralists and prophets. The virtue of the Roman people was not in those days exemplary. Yet, when we compare their manners, as they occasionally appear in the sacred history, with those of the Jews, how are we struck with the difference !

THE Romans are indeed pagans ; but they are not destitute of that good-nature and love of justice, which one expects to find in a civilized nation : the Jews are seldom seen in any other character than that of bloody barbarians. Pontius Pilate avowed our Lord's innocence, and showed an inclination to save his life ; Gallio proconsul of Achaia acted with good sense and moderation, when Paul was brought before him* ; Claudius Lyfias, Festus, and Felix, in their treatment of the same apostle, were not unmercifully severe ; and the centurion, whose prisoner he was in his voyage to Italy, was very much attached to him. But the Jewish priests, scribes, and elders, conspired to murder our Saviour without a trial, suborned persons to bear false

* See Disquisitions concerning the antiquities of the Christian church, chap. 1.

false witness against him, and bribed one of his followers to betray him; and the same assembly, or their successors in office, connived at a scheme, and of course concurred in it, for the assassination of Paul. In a word, it appears, that the greater part, and what we call the better sort, of the Jews of that age, when they had resolved on any measure, would not hesitate to employ any means, however unjust, cruel or shameful, in the accomplishment of it. That a nation so utterly profligate should have at the same time produced twelve men of such exalted piety, generous benevolence, and morals so refined and so perfect, as Jesus Christ and his apostles, is almost as great a miracle, by the acknowledgment of Rousseau himself (who is not partial to the sacred writers), as any that stands on record. There must have been something extraordinary in the
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the cause, that could in these circumstances produce characters so transcendently excellent.

OF our Lord's disciples, previously to their conversion, we know little; but this we know, that they became soon after preachers and patterns of righteousness. How is it possible that this should have been the effect of their engaging in an imposture? Can the continued practice of hypocrisy and lying improve and purify the heart? The age wherein they lived, being more enlightened than any that had gone before it, and beyond measure addicted to disputation and inquiry, was a most unfavourable period for the introduction of any public fraud. In all that part of the world the arms of Rome had established her policy, the exactness whereof is well known: and the Greek learning, universally studied by
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the Romans, was likely to be carried into every country that was subject to their power.

It deserves particular notice, that, till after the death of their master, the apostles were never cured of the national mistake, that the Messiah was to be a great temporal prince, and to make the Jews the most powerful people in the world. Accordingly we find, that, immediately after his crucifixion, they were greatly disconcerted, and at a loss what to think of him. ‘ We trusted, said they, that it had been he who should ‘ have redeemed Israel *.’ At that time, it seems, the cross was a stumbling block to them, as well as to others. And no wonder ; considering the hopes they had formed, and the sad disappointment occasioned by an event, which, though

* See the last chapter of St Luke.

though he had plainly foretold it, they were so unwilling to believe, as to flatter themselves it could not happen. In this state of confusion and trouble, if they had entertained any suspicion of imposture, nay if they had not been certain that there was no imposture, might they not, with a very good grace, and is it not probable that they would, have returned to their business and their first religion, saying, This was not the man whom we believed him to be? And, as, for reasons already given, nothing could have been more agreeable to their rulers, than such a declaration from such persons, it must undoubtedly have promoted their temporal interest. But their adherence to their Lord, and his cause, in circumstances so very extraordinary, is a proof, that they knew they did right; and were thoroughly satisfied, that the supernatural knowledge, which they received about this
time

time from himself, after his resurrection, and at the descent of the Holy Ghost, was really from heaven.

THE reader will be pleased to bestow a second thought on this argument. Let us for a moment take for granted what is plainly absurd, and suppose it is possible, that the apostles, during the *life* of their master, might have been imposed on; that the miracles they saw him perform were not real but fictitious; that the divine sanctity of his manners was assumed, and not genuine; and that the excellency of his doctrine, the authority that accompanied all his words, and the veneration which his presence inspired, were the effect of mere human eloquence and address: yet surely his *death*, if it had put an end to his being, would have at last opened their eyes, and satisfied them, that he was not

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what he had declared himself to be. With this persuasion, which on the present supposition they must have had, they, in affirming that he was risen from the dead, and in continuing to teach what he had taught, must have known themselves to be impostors. What then could be their motive to persist in a lie? That which could be no motive at all: the certain prospect of persecution, and death, (for how could they imagine it would fare better with them, than it had fared with their Master!) without any advantage whatever to counterbalance those evils. And what would have been their motives to return to their Jewish profession, and acknowledge they had been imposed on? The strongest that can influence human nature: first, that indignation, which would be natural in men, who had forsaken all to follow a person, whom they now found to have

have deluded them into a very dangerous snare ; secondly, the hope of advancing their interest, by doing that which, for reasons already given, must have gratified their rulers in the highest degree ; and, thirdly, the consciousness of having, as became honest men, performed a duty, which they owed to themselves, their religion, and their country. In fact, if they were endowed with any share of understanding or of spirit, nay if they were not both idiots and madmen, it is not possible to account for their conduct on any other supposition than this, that their testimony is true. The man must be credulous indeed as well as ignorant of human nature, who can hesitate to admit this conclusion ;—unless he choose to reject the New Testament history altogether. And, if he do this, let him account for the existence of the Christian religion, if he can.

And let him no more pretend, that credit is due to ancient records.

WHEN we compare the four gospels with one another, we see nothing like collusion in the authors, but we may see very plain evidence that there is no collusion. They do not all relate the same things, nor in exactly the same manner; nor does any one of their books seem intended as an apology for any other, or as a comment upon it. In the style of each there are peculiarities, more observable indeed in the original Greek than in any translation; but the same unaffected simplicity prevails through all. Their testimonies differ not in any thing material; and yet they differ as much as is usually expected in witnesses, separately examined, and giving a candid account of what they had seen and heard. A perfect co-incidence, where
testimonies

testimonies consist of many particulars, would breed suspicion of a pre-concerted plan: a few slight variations, in matters of little moment, would in most cases impress a persuasion of the integrity of witnesses. If in this manner we judge of the veracity of one another, and if the common sense of mankind warrants the judgment, and their experience after long trial finds no flaw in it; why should we argue from different principles, in judging of the veracity of the evangelists?

LAYING all these things together; every person, who understands human nature, and has read the New Testament with care, and with that humility and teachableness, that form as it were the groundwork of Christian faith, must be satisfied, that the apostles were no impostors, but believed sincerely what they taught:—which, in-

deed, to a man of taste would appear, as observed already, from the simplicity and artless manner, in which they tell their story, deliver their doctrine, and record their own faults, mistakes, and follies.

II. THEY believed what they taught, and what they recorded. And if so, their faith must have been the effect, either of **WEAKNESS**, or of **WELL-GROUNDED CONVICTION**.

OF weakness it could not be the effect. Such of their doctrines as are level to human capacity appear to be agreeable to the purest truth, and the soundest morality. All the genius and learning of the heathen world; all the penetration of Pythagoras, Socrates, and Aristotle, had never been able to produce such a system of moral duty, and so rational an account of Providence

dence and of man, as is to be found in the New Testament. Compared, indeed, to this, all other moral and theological wisdom

Loses discountenanced, and like folly shows.

Was the great apostle of the gentiles a weak man ; he who spoke and wrote with such energy and address, and whose eloquence made a Roman proconsul tremble ? Were those weak men, who taught a system of opinions, which even the sovereigns of the world, and some of the least cruel, the most learned, and the most politic of them too, thought it their interest to bear down and destroy, not with argument, in which it would appear they had no confidence, but with fire and sword ? Were those weak men, who, in defiance of persecution, and in opposition to all the power, policy, and learning,
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of the Roman empire, brought in, though unarmed and defenceless, a new religion, which continues to this day ; is gradually extending itself over the earth more and more ; and by the still small voice of reason daily puts to silence, or confutes at least, its most cunning and most inveterate adversaries ? Were those weak men, who taught that, which has given wisdom and happiness to millions of mankind, and has without violence introduced into the manners and policy of a great part of the world changes the most important and beneficial and likely to be as durable as the world itself ? Could those, in fine, be weak men, whom the most inquisitive and most enlightened minds that have been on earth since their time, whom Bacon and Grotius, whom Newton and Boyle, whom Hooker, Clarke, Butler, and Stillingfleet, whom Milton, Clarendon, Addison,

Addison, Arbuthnot, and Lyttleton, have held in the highest veneration, as not only wise, but inspired? Either, then, let the infidel admit, that the publishers of Christianity were not weak men; or let him prove, that the great persons now mentioned were destitute of understanding, or at least in that respect inferior to himself.

IN the sciences it has often happened, that, from ignorance of nature, men of great abilities have been led into error, which accidental discovery or more accurate observation, has enabled succeeding inquirers to rectify. But no modern discoveries invalidate in the smallest degree the proofs of our religion. There is nothing in the philosophy of evidence that corresponds to telescopes or microscopes, to electricity or magnetism. Men judge of that matter now, as they did formerly. Credible

dible testimony and their senses they believed from the beginning, and they do so still. Nor has it yet been found out, that any miracle recorded in the Gospel is impossible to divine power, or any doctrine there taught unworthy of divine wisdom. Every new discovery in the visible universe exalts, when rightly understood, our ideas of the goodness and greatness of the Creator, and ought, consequently, to cherish that love and fear of him, which the whole tenor of revelation commands us to cultivate. And every late improvement in criticism and the knowledge of antiquity is found, when applied to the sacred writings, to throw light upon them, and, by so doing, to confirm the history, and recommend the doctrine. The progress of science, therefore, whereby in so many other respects the opinions of the antients have been confuted or rectified, seems to confirm
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what the apostles taught concerning the religion of Jesus, by proving its permanency and unalterable nature.

GRANTING then, that the modern infidel, profiting by the discoveries of latter times, may be better informed in the sciences than the primitive Christians were; it will not follow that he, or that the acutest of our philosophers, can be a better judge of the leading evidences of Christianity. It is true, that in some things we are not so credulous, as the world must have been while philosophy and history were little known; and that of course we are more scrupulous in the examination of some sorts of evidence. But, in regard to the miracles, wherof the apostles were eye-witnesses, which they recorded in their writings, in the belief of which they lived and died, and most of which their enemies of that
time

time did not deny, they were as little liable to be imposed on, as if each of them had possessed the learning of Grotius, with the penetration of Newton. For such was the nature of those miracles, that, to make an attentive spectator a competent judge of them, neither learning nor genius was necessary; nor any other talent or accomplishment, but a sound mind, an honest heart, and the right use of one's senses.

THEY saw men, whom they and all the country knew to have been blind from their birth, made to see in an instant, without the application of any instrument or medicine: they saw leprosy, palsy, and other obstinate diseases, removed in the same manner, by barely speaking a word: they saw the dead raised to life, yea raised even from the grave: they saw a man's ear cut
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off by the sword of Peter, and the wound immediately healed with a touch: they saw water converted into wine in the presence of many persons, who drank of it, and were satisfied that the transformation was real: they themselves were part of a multitude of five thousand, whose hunger was allayed by a few loaves and fishes, when more fragments were left than there had been food at first: they saw their Master walk on the surface of the sea; and they were present, when at his command a storm was changed into a calm.

By the instantaneous operation of the same divine word, they frequently saw human bodies set free from the tyranny of demons: for that God, in order to manifest the supremacy of his Son over the powers of darkness, as

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well as over the visible universe, might, at that time, and in that country, permit evil spirits to molest mankind more than usual, will not be affirmed to be either impossible or improbable, by those who acknowledge the possibility of revelation. Or if we suppose the distemper to have been no other than madness, or than epilepsy, (which however the general tenor of the history will hardly permit us to suppose), the cure must still be allowed to be miraculous. For to remove these diseases by speaking a word, and to expel a demon, are equally beyond the reach of human power, and equally easy to that which is divine.

THE apostles heard their Master foretel several events, particularly his crucifixion and resurrection, and they saw that, as well as some of his other prophecies,

phesies, accomplished. They saw him publicly crucified, pierced with a spear, and buried. They saw the prodigies that accompanied his last suffering; at least they must have seen the preternatural darkness, and felt the earthquake; and the rending of the veil of the temple they would not have mentioned, if they had not known, that it was so. Three days after, according to his prediction, they saw him alive again, conversed with him, eat and probably drank with him, felt his body to be a real material body, felt even the scars of his wounds, saw him frequently during the space of forty days; and finally, were standing by him, and receiving his benediction, when in open day they saw him ascend towards heaven, following him with their eyes till a cloud received him out of their sight.

THESE are facts, in regard to which they could not be mistaken, though they had been the most credulous of mankind. But credulous they were not; some of them, on the contrary, seem to have been unreasonably sceptical. Indeed, if we allow them to have had common understanding, which no person who knows their story will deny, we must suppose, that they would not rashly, or without full conviction, engage in a cause, which in a temporal view was likely to cost them so dear. They were, it is true, unlettered men: but the propriety of their conduct, the wisdom of their doctrine, and the success of their ministry, are so much the clearer proofs of their inspiration.

ONE of them, a man of learning and uncommon abilities, a zealous Jew, and
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an unrelenting persecutor of Christians, in the midst of his sanguinary career, while he ‘verily thought with ‘himself’ that the cause he had engaged in was acceptable to God, and beneficial to his country;—while, by adhering to it, he seemed to have every thing to hope that could gratify his ambition, and while, by revolting from it in the way he did, he had every temporal inconvenience to fear that can intimidate human nature:—this man, I say, while in these circumstances, and charged with a public commission which he himself had solicited from the high priest, and at the head of a train of attendants, was, together with them, at noon day, struck to the earth by an extraordinary light from heaven; in consequence of which he became a Christian, declaring that he had been

warned by a supernatural voice ; renounced for ever all worldly pursuits, and cheerfully submitted to poverty, persecution, and death, for the religion of Jesus.

WHAT could be his motive ? Was it a regard to duty, founded on his knowledge, and his love, of the truth ? Then is his conduct easily accounted for ; and his resignation to the many evils he had to suffer was the effect of that support, which pious men receive, from the approbation of their own mind, the hope of future reward, and the enlivening influence of divine grace. From any other principle is it possible to account rationally for his conduct ? Was it from lust of fame, the desire of pleasure or of power, or in order to better his fortune, that this man, with a mind elevated by genius,
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and enlightened by learning, chose to descend, with certain, imminent, and dreadful danger to himself, from a high and honourable station,—that he might become the associate of a few poor, despised, persecuted, and illiterate fishermen, among whom he never assumed any superiority, and whose master had lately been put to an ignominious death, as a malefactor, not only of the worst kind, but also of the meanest condition ?

IN a word, Paul either was, or was not, an impostor. If he was an impostor, he must have been a very singular one indeed. For, instead of aiming at riches, honour, pleasure, or power, (and at one, or other, or all of these, all other impostors have aimed), his hopes and purposes must in every respect have had a contrary direction.

rection. He must have preferred contempt to honour, imprisonment to liberty, danger to security, and scourging, stoning, hunger, nakedness *, and martyrdom, (for they were all before him, and he underwent them all without a murmur), to a life of ease and affluence. And, finally, being a strict Pharisee, and consequently believing a future state, he must, without any temporal allurements whatever, have preferred damnation to happiness in the world to come. But could he thus, in every sense of the word, prefer misery to its opposite? If he could, he was a madman:—which his writings and history prove he was not.

If he was no impostor, he must have been an honest man: and, that being admitted,

* 2 Cor. xi. 27. 1 Cor. iv. 11, 12, 13.

admitted, we must also admit what he testifies concerning the manner and consequences of his conversion; in other words, we must believe the gospel to be true. And if he was the author of those epistles, which ever since they were written have born his name; and if he taught those doctrines, which the physician Luke his fellow traveller heard from his mouth, and has recorded, he must have been, no frantick or weak enthusiast, but a person of good understanding, of exemplary virtue, and of the highest attainments in true wisdom;—in that wisdom, I mean, ‘which is from above,’ and which tends to purify our nature, and make us happy, both now and for ever. The thirteenth chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians would alone prove him to have been one of the best and wisest men that ever lived.

I SAID, that Paul, if he was not an impostor, must have been an honest man; and, this being admitted, that the gospel must be true. If indeed it could be shown, that he was credulous, and that before his conversion he had entertained any partiality to the doctrines and character of Jesus, it might seem possible at least, though no doubt very improbable, that his passions and imagination might have disordered his judgment, and perverted his senses; and, therefore, that the circumstances of his conversion, though believed by him to be real, might have been visionary. Well: was he a credulous man? Or had he any partiality of this kind?

So far was he from being credulous, that all he had heard of our Lord's miracles (for he must have heard of them, and from eye-witnesses too,) had

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no weight with him; and nothing could overcome his incredulity, but a miracle wrought upon himself:—wrought, not in darkness or in solitude, or at a time when any thing had happened to enfeeble or depress his mind, but at noon-day, in the publick highway, in the midst of his adherents, in the neighbourhood of a great town, and while he himself was employed, as he firmly believed, in the service of God, and of his country. And so far was he from entertaining any partiality to the Christian cause, that, till this miracle was wrought for his conversion, he looked upon Jesus as an impostor and blasphemer, and upon the disciples, as a set of men, whom it was in the highest degree meritorious to persecute and destroy.

IN some of his epistles, addressed to churches he had planted, we find him
declaring,

declaring, as a thing which they knew to be true, that he was endowed with the power of working miracles, and had actually wrought many. If the fact had been otherwise, would he have hazarded such a declaration, in writing to a people, among whom he knew he had personal opposers, and whom he was reproving for several irregularities *? And if the facts was so,—if he really was a worker of miracles, as well as a preacher of the purest and sublimest morality, must we not consider him, as in a very peculiar manner, and in a very high degree, favoured by that Being, who is the giver of every good and of every perfect gift?—They, who believe in God, and candidly weigh all these circumstances, will not object to St. Paul's veracity. And if that which he testifies concerning himself
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be true, it is absolutely impossible that the gospel can be false.

INDEED, the conversion of this great man, and his conduct both before and after he became an apostle, do alone amount to such a proof of our religion, as cannot be overthrown;—in any other way, than by proving the *Acts of the Apostles*, and the subsequent *epistles*, to be fiction and forgery. The reader will find a full, an elegant, and, I think, an unanswerable illustration, of this argument, in Lord Lyttelton's *Remarks on the Conversion of St. Paul*.

AND now, to conclude this part of the subject.—Let them, who are acquainted with the history of our Saviour, attend to it ever so slightly, and then say, what regard is due to the
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judgment of those, who talk of electricity and magnetism as principles in nature capable of exalting the man who understands them into a worker of miracles. Will magnetism or electricity, or any other natural principle that can be mentioned, enable the person who is skilled in it to raise himself or others from the dead; to cure diseases by speaking a word; to foretell future events; to make a few loaves and fishes a sufficient meal for five thousand men; to publish a system of morality more perfect than any other that ever was in the world; to impart to other men the power of working miracles, and particularly, of speaking languages they had never learned? We have heard of making the agitation of water subside by pouring oil on it: Plutarch mentions this as a well known fact, quotes Aristotle's reason
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for it, and gives another of his own * ; and of late it is said to have been proved by experiment ; but who will undertake to calm the sea by uttering a word !

THEY who compare the meekness and benevolence, the candour and modesty, the power and the dignity, of our Saviour, with the craft, secrecy, and ostentation, of a juggler, (one trembles even to think of the comparison), and find no material difference between the mighty works of the one and the petty tricks of the other, are far beyond the reach of argument, and must, on this subject at least, be absolutely irrational. As well might they say, that the juggler, because he can shift a card, or manage an easy calculation,

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* Plut. Nat. Quæst. 12.

lation, must have the command of nature, and the power of changing death into life. The clown, who should say so, would be laughed at for his credulity and ignorance. What then shall we think of the philosopher, who, in his judgment of our Saviour's miracles, shows himself equally ignorant and credulous ?

LASTLY; the apostles found themselves endowed, agreeably to their Lord's prediction, with the power of working such miracles as he had wrought. They saw the lame walk, the living drop down dead, and the dead arise to life, at their command. They felt themselves on a sudden enabled to speak a variety of languages they had never learned ; a talent which, in the course of their ministry, they must have had frequent occasion to exercise.

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In this is it probable, is it possible, that they could be mistaken?

THEIR faith, therefore, was the effect, not of WEAKNESS, but of WELL-GROUNDED CONVICTION. CONSEQUENTLY, THEIR TESTIMONY IS TRUE.

SECTION IV.

THE SUBJECT CONTINUED.

*The excellency and singular nature of
Christianity, a proof of its truth.*

IT was hinted, that the other evidences of our religion may be greatly confirmed by the consideration of its singular nature, and by the peculiar excellency of the knowledge we derive from it. For, if it shall be found to have made its way in the world, in opposition to human power, and by more than human means ; if its excellency be such as to transcend the noblest efforts of human wisdom ; and if

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in its purity and tendency it be altogether worthy of God ; we must, I think, assign it a divine original.

SOME things pertaining to this part of the subject have been mentioned already. But, in a disquisition of this sort, in which the evidence hangs so closely together, that scarce any one part of it can be treated separate from the rest, a few repetitions will be pardoned, because it is not easy to avoid them.

NEVER was there on earth any other person of so extraordinary a character as the Founder of our religion. In him we uniformly see a mildness, dignity, and composure, and a perfection of wisdom and of goodness, that plainly point him out as a superior being. But his superiority was all in his own divine mind. He had none of those outward
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advantages that have distinguished all other lawgivers. He had no influence in the state; he had no wealth; he aimed at no worldly power. He was the son of a carpenter's wife, and he was himself a carpenter. So poor were his reputed parents, that at the time of his birth his mother could obtain no better lodging than a stable; and so poor was he himself, that he often had no lodging at all. That he had no advantages of education, we may infer from the surprise expressed by his neighbours on hearing him speak in the synagogue: 'Whence hath this man these things? What wisdom is this which is given him? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary? Are not his brethren and sisters with us?' This point, however, we need not insist on; as from no education, that his own or any other country could have afforded, was it possible for him to derive that super-

supernatural wisdom and power, that sanctity of life, and that purity of doctrine, which distinguish him from all other human beings. His first adherents were a few fishermen; for whom he was so far from making any provision, that, when he sent them out to preach repentance and heal diseases, they were, by his desire, furnished with nothing, but one coat, a pair of sandals, and a staff. He went about, in great humility and meekness, doing good, teaching wisdom, and glorifying God, for the space of about three years after the commencement of his ministry; and then, as he himself had foreseen and foretold, he was publickly crucified.—This is the man, who at this day gives law to a great part of the world, and to all the most enlightened nations. This is the man, who has been the author of virtue and happiness to millions and millions of the human race. And
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this is he, whom the wisest and best men that ever lived have revered as a divine person, and gloried in as the deliverer and saviour of mankind.

IN all this is there nothing extraordinary, nothing that seems to require the operation of more than human wisdom, and more than human power? We have heard of great events proceeding from small causes; but in general we can trace the connection between them, and account for it from the common principles that regulate human affairs. But here, supposing Jesus to have been nothing more than a mere man, and no other than human means to have been employed in promulgating and supporting his religion; the cause and the effect are utterly inadequate, and the influence of the one upon the other perfectly unintelligible.

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THIS religion, taught at first by a few obscure, unlettered, and persecuted men, most of whom were put to death for no other reason but because they taught it, was in a very short time spread over part of Asia and a great part of Europe; notwithstanding the bloody persecutions which it had to encounter, from Nero to Dioclesian. Think of the power engaged to bear it down, and that by which it was to be supported; and can there be any doubt, that truth, and miracles, and the protection of heaven, must have been on its side? Was any other religion ever introduced in this manner? The Mahometan was brought in by a commander at the head of a victorious army, and in a part of the world which has never in any age been distinguished for liberty or literature: nay, to this day, slavery and ignorance are the inseparable attendants of the religion
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of Mahomet. The Jewish was established in one small nation only, and had for its apparent author the greatest man of that nation, and met there with no considerable opponent; which, by the by, considering its burdensome ceremonies, could hardly have happened, and we are sure did not happen, without the aid of miracles. The pagan religions were a sort of political institutions, adapted to the ignorance and credulity of those who received them; so that they had no opposition either to suffer or to fear: nor indeed do they seem to have been considered as of moment enough to excite serious controversy, far less to kindle persecution. No man ever laid down his life for the honour of Jupiter, Neptune, or Apollo: but how many thousands have sealed their Christian testimony with their blood!

ANOTHER

ANOTHER singularity in our religion is, that it has been more spoken against than any other. Every part of its evidence has been repeatedly examined, objected to, and vindicated. Equally friendly to freedom and true philosophy, wherever it has existed in any tolerable purity, it has raised the attention of inquisitive men ; the greatest philosophers that ever lived have inquired into it, and found it true ; and the utmost acuteness of sophistry has been employed to prove it false. What is the consequence of all this ? It is, that the evidence of our faith remains at this day as clear and complete, as it has been in any age since that of the apostles and their immediate successors. Light minds, from inattention or ignorance ; profligate minds, from a dislike to its purity ; and vain minds, out of ostentation, and from the love of singularity, may have

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apostatized from it: but the Christian who has made it his study, and knows the reason of the faith that is in him, will not admit, that any argument has ever been brought against it, which has not been refuted. Can this be said of any other religion, or of any system of unchristian opinions, that ever was heard of? Nay, I trust there are, and I believe it will not be doubted that there are, many thousands of learned and rational Christians, who if they were called to so severe a trial, would cheerfully lay down their lives for the honour of God and their Redeemer. Is the zeal and sincerity of the unbeliever equally to be depended on? Would any disciple of Bolingbroke, Hume, or Voltaire, suffer martyrdom in the cause of his master?

THESE singularities in the fate and fortunes of Christianity seem to show,
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that it could not have either been so generally known, or so long existed, if it had not been supported by means more than human. There are in it other singularities, which prove, that it deserved to be so supported, and that it could not have been the work of mere human wisdom.

THE evidence arising from these has been called its Internal Evidence ; and is, in the opinion of some learned men, so great, that scarce any other is necessary to prove our religion to be from heaven.

FOR first, the morality of the gospel gives it an infinite superiority over all systems of doctrine that ever were devised by man. Were our lives and opinions to be regulated as it prescribes, nothing would be wanting to make us happy : there would be no injustice,

no impiety, no disorderly passions; harmony and love would universally prevail; every man, content with his lot, resigned to the divine will, and fully persuaded that a happy eternity is before him, would pass his days in tranquillity and joy, to which neither anxiety, nor pain, nor even the fear of death, could ever give any interruption. The best systems of pagan ethics are very imperfect, and not free from absurdity; and in them are recommended modes of thinking unfuitable to human nature, and modes of conduct which, though they might have been useful in a political view, did not tend to virtue and happiness universal. But of all our Lord's institutions the end and aim is to promote the happiness, by promoting the virtue of all mankind.

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AND secondly ; his peculiar doctrines are not like any thing of human contrivance. ' Never man spake like this ' man.' One of the first names given to that dispensation of things which he came to introduce, was *the kingdom*, or the reign, *of heaven*. It was justly so called ; being thus distinguished, not only from the religion of Moses, the sanctions whereof related to the present life, but also from every human scheme of moral, political, or ecclesiastical legislation.

THE views of the heathen moralist extended not beyond this world ; those of the Christian are fixed on that which is to come. The former was concerned for his own country only or chiefly ; the latter takes concern in the happiness of all men, of all nations, conditions, and capacities. A few, and but a few, of the antient philosophers,

spoke of a future state of retribution as a thing desirable and not improbable : revelation speaks of it as certain ; and of the present life as a state of trial, wherein virtue or holiness is necessary, not only to entitle us to that salvation which, through the mercy of God and the merits of his Son, Christians are taught to look for, but also to prepare us, by habits of piety and benevolence, for a reward, which none but the pure in heart can receive, or could relish.

THE duties of piety, as far as the heart is concerned, were not much attended to by the heathen lawgiver. Cicero coldly ranks them with the social virtues, and says very little about them. The sacrifices were mere ceremony. And what the Stoicks taught of resignation to the will of heaven, or to the decrees of fate, was so repugnant to some of their other tenets, that little
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good could be expected from it. But of every Christian virtue piety is an essential part. The love and the fear of God must every moment prevail in the heart of a follower of Jesus; and whether he eat or drink, or whatever he do, it must all be to the glory of the Creator. How different this from the philosophy of Greece and Rome!

IN a word, the heathen morality, *even in its best form*, that is, as two or three of their best philosophers taught it, amounts to little more than this: Be useful to yourselves, your friends, and your country: so shall ye be respectable while ye live, and honoured when ye die; and it is to be hoped ye may receive reward in another life. The language of the Christian lawgiver is different. The world is not worthy of the ambition of an immortal being. Its honour and pleasures have a tendency

dency to debase the mind, and disqualify it for future happiness. Set therefore your affections on things above, and not on things on the earth. Let it be your supreme desire to obtain God's favour: and, by a course of discipline, begun here and to be completed hereafter, prepare yourselves for a re-admission into that rank which was forfeited by the fall, and for again being but a little lower than the angels, and crowned with glory and honour everlasting.

WHAT an idea is here! Is there any thing like this in Xenophon or Plato, in Cicero, Seneca, or Epictetus? 'Whence had this man these things? What wisdom is this that was given him? Surely man gave it not; for man had it not to give. This is an idea, which never occurred to human imagination, till it was taught by a
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poor carpenter of Galilee, and by a few fishermen who followed him. Yet to the native dignity, and undeniable degeneracy, of human nature, no other moral theory was ever so well adapted; and no other has so direct a tendency to promote the glory of God, and the real good of mankind. Is it possible to explain this upon the principles that usually regulate human affairs? Is it possible for us to believe, that teachers so holy, so benevolent, and so pious, so superior to the world, and so thoroughly disengaged from its allurements were not taught of God? As easy almost it is to believe, that this world was not made by him. Is it possible for us to imagine, that persons of such a character could have employed their lives in the promulgation of a lie, and willingly encountered persecution and death, in support of it? As well may we imagine, that an evil
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tree brings forth good fruit, and that men gather grapes from thorns, and figs from thistles.

BUT had not the prophets prophesied of Christ and his gospel, and its character and tendency? And if so, how can it be said, that no such thing had ever before occurred to human imagination?—It is true, that the prophets had prophesied these things; but, though they *foretold*, it is not certain that they *foresaw* them. On the contrary, there is reason to think, that, if they had distinctly understood what they predicted, they would have expressed it in plainer and less figurative language; or at least that they would have left traditions behind them, which, in after times, among people so tenacious of tradition as the Jews were, might have served as a key to those sacred writings. It was enough
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for the prophets to know that they had authority to speak what they spoke, or to commit to writing what the Spirit suggested: to explain it to the people, or to inquire themselves into the meaning of it, was probably no part of their business. And it must be as easy for divine power to make prophets foretel without foresight, as to enable them both to foretel and to foresee.

AFTER all, it must be owned, that this argument for Christianity, drawn from the peculiar excellency of its doctrines, cannot appear equally striking to all men. They only will see it in its full lustre, who are conversant in Holy Writ, and have a pretty distinct view of the whole extent of Christian theology; whereof I cannot, in so small a tract as this, propose to give even an abridgement. To Mr. Jenyns's *View*
of

of the internal evidence of Christianity, in which are many ingenious observations, though all are not unexceptionable, I beg leave to refer the reader ; and shall conclude this part of my subject with a remark or two.

WHAT an elevation must it give to our pious affections, to contemplate the Supreme Being and his Providence, as revealed to us in Scripture ! We are there taught, that man was created in the image of God, innocent and happy: and that he had no sooner fallen into sin, than his Creator, instead of abandoning him, and his offspring, to the natural consequences of his disobedience, and of their hereditary depravity, was pleased to begin a wonderful dispensation of grace, in order to rescue from perdition, and raise again to happiness, as many as should acquiesce in the terms of the offered salva-

salvation, and regulate their lives accordingly.

By the sacred books that contain the history of this dispensation we are further taught, that God is a spirit, unchangeable, and eternal, universally present, and absolutely perfect; that it is our duty to fear him, as a being of consummate purity and inflexible justice, and to love him as the father of mercies, and the God of all consolation; to trust in him as the friend, the comforter, and the almighty guardian of all who believe and obey him; to rejoice in him as the best of beings, and adore him as the greatest:—we are taught, that he will make allowance for the frailties of our nature, and pardon the sins of those who repent:—and, that we may see, in the strongest light, his peculiar benignity to the human race, we are taught, that he gave

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his only Son as our ransom and deliverer ; and we are not only permitted, but commanded, to pray to him, and address him as OUR FATHER :—we are taught, moreover, that the evils incident to this state of trial are permitted by him, in order to exercise our virtue, and so prepare us for a future state of never-ending felicity ; and that these momentary afflictions are pledges of his paternal love, and shall, if we receive them as such, and venerate them accordingly, work out for us ‘ an exceeding great and eternal weight of glory.’ If these hopes and these sentiments contribute more to our happiness, and to the purification of our nature, than any thing else in the world can do, surely that religion, to which alone we owe these sentiments and hopes, must be the greatest blessing that ever was conferred on the posterity of Adam.

AND

AND is it, after all, but a mere human contrivance ; the invention of mean and illiterate men, who lived, and who died, in the voluntary promulgation of falsehood ? To what other human artifice does this bear any resemblance ? Does not this religion as plainly prove itself to be the work of a wise and gracious God, as the absurdity of the pagan superstitions proves them to have been the work of weak and wretched men ?

To the great end of improving, renewing, and perfecting our whole nature, no invention of man could ever have been adapted ; that being an idea, which could never have occurred to mere human wisdom, and which, if it had occurred, would have been deemed an impossibility. But to this great end, so worthy of God, and so honourable to man, our religion is adapted.

ed in such a way, as fills the humble and considerate mind with wonder and adoration; and would indeed raise inexpressible astonishment, if it had not been familiar to us from our infancy.

CHRISTIANITY proposes to our imitation the highest examples of benevolence, purity, and piety. It shows, that all our actions, purposes, and thoughts, are to us of infinite importance; their consequences being nothing less than happiness or misery in the life to come: and thus it operates most powerfully on our self-love. By teaching, that all mankind are brethren; by commanding us to love our neighbour as ourselves; and by declaring every man our neighbour to whom we have it in our power to do good; it improves benevolence to the highest pitch. By prohibiting revenge, malice,

lice, pride, vanity, envy, sensuality, and covetousness; and by requiring us to forgive, to pray for, and to bless our enemies, and to do to others as we would that they should do to us, it lays a restraint on every malevolent and turbulent passion; and reduces the whole of social virtue to two or three precepts; so brief, that they cannot be forgotten; so plain, that they cannot be misunderstood; so reasonable, that no man of sense controverts them; and so well suited to human nature and human affairs that every candid mind may easily, and on all occasions, apply them to practice.

CHRISTIANITY recommends the strictest self-attention, by this awful consideration, that God is continually present with us, knows what we think, as well as what we do, and will judge the world in righteousness, and render

unto every man according to his works. It makes us consider conscience, as his voice and law within us; purity of heart, as that which alone can qualify us for the enjoyment of future reward; and mutual love, or charity, as that without which all other virtues and accomplishments are of no value: and, by a view of things peculiarly striking, it causes vice to appear a most pernicious and abominable thing, which cannot escape punishment. Purity of heart it still further recommends, by teaching this wonderful doctrine; that even the bodies of good men shall at last, in a glorified state, be re-united to their souls, and made, as that of Adam originally was, immortal; and that, therefore, in this life of general probation, they must be kept free from dishonour, and, instead of ministering to those sensualities that debase our nature,

nature, be employed as instruments in doing good.

IN a word, Christianity, as Bishop Taylor well observes, ' is a doctrine, ' in which nothing is superfluous or ' burdensome ; and in which there is ' nothing wanting, which can procure ' happiness to mankind, or by which ' God can be glorified. And if,' continues he, ' wisdom, and mercy, and ' justice, and simplicity, and holiness, ' and purity, and meekness, and contentedness, and charity, be images of ' God, and rays of divinity, then that ' doctrine, in which all these shine so ' gloriously, and in which nothing else ' is ingredient, must needs be from ' God*.'

I CON-

* Moral Demonstration of the Truth of the Christian Religion.

I CONCLUDE the chapter in the following words of the same great author.

‘ If the holy Jesus had come into the
‘ world with less splendour of power
‘ and mighty demonstrations, yet the
‘ excellency of what he taught makes
‘ him alone fit to be the master of the
‘ world.’



CHAP.

C H A P. III.

OBJECTIONS ANSWERED.

THE advocate for Christianity has nothing to do with the peculiar tenets of Luther, Calvin, or Bellarmine, or with any other system which is liable to be tinged with human infirmity: his business is, to vindicate 'the truth as it is in Jesus.' I do not therefore think myself concerned to answer any objection of those writers, who mistake the corruptions of Christianity for Christianity itself. They who persecute or hate or even judge uncharitably

charitably of others, act in direct opposition to the plainest, and indeed to the essential, doctrines of the gospel: and every church that encourages cruelty, injustice, or uncharitableness, in any degree, is in the same degree unchristian.

BUT why should Christianity be liable to corruption? Would not the power and goodness of God have appeared in it more conspicuously, if he had made it insusceptible of debasement or change? Totally to debase or alter it, is indeed impossible, as long as the sacred records remain; to which all sects of Christians appeal as their standard of faith, and which their mutual jealousy of each other will never suffer to be materially corrupted. But every thing must be liable to debasement, which is entrusted to a creature so frail and fallible as man. What
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is more debased, or more perverted, than health and speech? Yet it will not be said, that the divine goodness and power would have appeared more conspicuously in us, if we had all been sickly and dumb. In every state of moral probation, error must be possible, and evil must exist.

BUT, beside the general principle of debasement arising from the frailty of our nature, other causes of a more particular, and indeed of an extraordinary kind, co-operated, soon after the apostolic age, in corrupting the Christian religion. Was it possible, that its gentle influence could check the progress of that ruin, into which the enormous mass of the Roman power was then rushing headlong; or prevent the confusion, the crimes, and the universal degeneracy of manners, which always attend the fall of empire, and did

so remarkably distinguish that of the Roman? And, amidst the savage uproar of the conquering invaders from the north, was it possible, that the soft accents of the gospel of peace could be heard with efficacy, or heard at all? Then followed that long night of intellectual darkness, threatening the final extinction of every ray of knowledge that had hitherto enlightened the sons of men. And from this chaos of ignorance was it possible to exclude the fiends of superstition, or those other sanguinary demons of rapacity and cruelty, which never fail to haunt the uncultivated mind? It cannot be matter of surprise, that in these circumstances, a religion founded in peace, in right reason, and in the purest morality, should first be neglected, then misunderstood, and afterwards grossly corrupted; and that, from being made subservient to the purposes of human,

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and often of barbarous policy, it should, in its corrupted state, contract many stains of barbarism, and much of the pride and vanity and other follies of human nature.

IN fact, in the course of a few centuries, Christianity had lost its beauty and purifying virtue, and, like a stream choaked with rubbish, if the reader will pardon the figure, presented an image of danger and desolation, rather than of utility and comfort. But, though the waters were polluted, the fountain was not dried up. And, by the gradual operation of causes, some more and others less observable, when obstructions began at last to give way, and the channel to open, this river of life again broke forth in a copious and sprightly current; which, though not yet every where free from restraint nor in any nation restored to its primitive

R purity,

purity, will in time, it is hoped, diffuse itself by the divine blessing into all lands, and in its progress,

Work itself clear, and, as it runs, refine ;
 Till by degrees the floating mirror shine,
 Reflect the flowers that on its border blow,
 And heaven's own light in its fair bosom
 show.

For, to drop the allegory, whatever other changes may happen, we have nothing now to apprehend similar to the Gothic invasions, or to that extinction of literature which attended and followed them. As the world is now constituted, learning and liberal inquiry are likely to prevail in it more and more. And, as these prevail, ignorance and tyranny, sophistry and superstition, which have hitherto been the most deadly enemies of both Christian faith and true philosophy, will in
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the same proportion lose their influence. But to return.

To confute all the cavils of unbelief, would be endless; and to enter very minutely into the detail of them, would extend this little book to a size, which might discourage from reading it those for whom it is intended. I confine myself, therefore, to those objections chiefly which I have heard in conversation, and which seem to me most likely to draw the attention and pervert the minds of young persons. And of these objections several have been considered already.

I. THE number of unbelievers, who have appeared in this and other ages, and the learning and abilities of some of them, are, I find, stumbling-blocks to many. But let it be remembered, that a greater number might be speci-

fied of believers, still more distinguished for learning, candour, and penetration, than any infidels that can be named of this, or any other age. Nor let it be forgotten, that the founders of our religion foretold, that unbelievers of various kinds, and of considerable abilities, would arise: so that, if they had not arisen, several prophecies in the New Testament would not have been accomplished.

BUT passing this; and in order to give a more explicit answer to the objection; it may be proper to consider, what, from the declarations of our Lord himself, as well as from the nature of the thing, may be inferred concerning the character of those persons, who should be capable of becoming his disciples. For if it shall be found, that there are infidels who have not that character, and that infidels in general have

have it not, their unbelief is a proof of his wisdom and foreknowledge, and may consequently furnish an argument, not against his religion, but for it.

I. THE first thing necessary to qualify the human mind for receiving this, or indeed any other, doctrine, is attention. This our Lord repeatedly demanded: 'he that hath ear to hear, let him hear.' The mighty works he performed, the wonderful things he spoke, the sanctity of his life, the benevolence of his manners, and the authority that accompanied his teaching, were sufficient, one would think, to have made all Syria attend, and did in fact raise the attention of many. And, though *we* see no miracles, as they did, nor hear the voice of the divine teacher, yet we see, we hear, and we read, concerning him, what is sufficient to make every one of us attend, who de-

fires to know the truth and his duty. The existence, and long continuance, of this religion ; its singular nature and history ; and the learning, abilities, and virtues, of many of those who have believed, ought to satisfy every considerate mind, that there is something extraordinary in it, and that to be indifferent about it may be very dangerous.

2. BUT, secondly, in order to know ‘ the truth as it is in Jesus,’ we must not only attend, but also inquire. Our Saviour often taught in parables. His hearers, if they had been suitably affected by his miracles and plainer doctrines, would have asked the meaning of those darker sayings: and when they did so, with a sincere desire of information, we find, that he always gave it. Them who expressed no curiosity, and made no inquiry, he permitted to remain :

remain in ignorance. Was this unreasonable? He came to *call* sinners to repentance, but not to *compel* them. Every circumstance considered, of his life and doctrine, his benevolence, his piety, his power, and his wisdom, (whereof the Jews could not be ignorant); did not this want of curiosity amount to a proof, that their hearts were, by prejudice and other bad habits, hardened against the love both of God and of man, as well as of the truth? And is it possible, that hearts of such a temper should voluntarily receive a religion, whereof piety and benevolence, or (to adopt the Scriptural terms) godliness and charity, are essential principles?

LET it be considered further, that, till our curiosity with respect to religion be so far raised, as to incline us to study the Scriptures, we cannot feel
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the force of some of the strongest proofs of their truth ; those particularly, as already hinted, that arise from their peculiar excellence, and from prophecy. And therefore he who is disposed to cavil at religion, and will not give himself the trouble to study it, must necessarily remain ignorant and sceptical. Is there any thing strange in this ? Suppose a father to desire his son to study medicine ; and suppose that the son, from prejudices against it, or indifference about it, will not attend, either to what his master says, or to the books he recommends, is it possible that he can ever become a physician, or get the better of his prejudices ? Will the careless sceptick excuse himself by saying, ‘ I need not read the Bible : I know from Voltaire, and Hume, and Bolingbroke, what Christianity is ? ’ Then let him be told, that every one of the persons mentioned, and every other

other infidel whose writings are extant, can be proved, from his own books, to have been grossly ignorant of Christianity. And let him be reminded further, that to acquiesce in that character of Jesus, or of any other person, which is given by the declared and mortal enemy of that person, is no sign either of prudence or of candour.

BUT I have looked, he will perhaps say, into creeds and confessions, which are said to contain the very quintessence of Scripture; and they are not at all to my mind; and I suppose I should find Scripture itself as little so: why then should I read it? I answer, supposing those creeds and confessions unexceptionable, which all creeds and confessions; are not yet still they are abridgements, and to him who is not conversant in Scripture must appear abstruse, and hardly intelligible. And besides,

besides, recurring to an example already given, let me be permitted to say, that if any man were *very much interested* to know my character, and had the means of knowing it by conversing and living with me, he would, if he were either honest or wise, study myself, and not trust implicitly to what is said of me, either by my enemies, or by my friends. We are commanded to search the Scriptures, and told that in them we shall find evidence of their truth. If we have not done so, we know not what they are: if we will not do so, we never can know it.

3. A third thing, necessary to prepare us for the reception of Christian faith, is, a lowly mind, free from prejudice, and willing to hear, and to learn. This our Lord often declares. ‘ Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall
‘ not receive the kingdom of God as a
‘ little

‘ little child, shall in nowise enter
 ‘ therein :’ the obvious meaning where-
 of is, that if we do not attend to the
 doctrines of the gospel, with the humi-
 lity and teachableness of a young child,
 it is impossible for us to believe them.
 A young child is of all animals the
 most unassuming and docile. He is
 not inclined to cavil at the information
 he may receive from an affectionate
 father. And he is free from preju-
 dice, and soon becomes sensible of his
 own weakness, and of the need he has
 of instruction. At least, if this is not
 true of every child, it is certainly true
 of many, and ought to be of all. When
 with these dispositions men begin and
 carry on their inquiries into Chirstia-
 nity, they will not object to its doctrine,
 or be dissatisfied with its evidence ; but
 will adore the infinite goodness and
 condescension of the Deity, in treat-
 ing them as his children, and permit-
 ting

ting them to call him their Father. Is it too much, to require of Christians, this humility, candour, and exemption from prejudice? It is no more than Newton requires of every one who would study philosophy: it is no more than every master requires of his apprentice.

BUT must the young Christian, during his noviciate, make no use of his reason? has he nothing to do, but to listen, and believe? He is commanded to use his reason in all cases, in which a prudent father would encourage his child to use it; that is, in all cases whereof he is a competent judge: and, in all cases whatever, he must use his reason so far, as to admit nothing that contradicts it. But, as a father is sometimes obliged, and has an undoubted right, to require implicit faith from his children, and to tell them, that, till their
faculties

faculties be more improved, they will not understand the reason of such and such a precept or doctrine ; so our heavenly Father has an undoubted right to require of us a thankful acquiescence in dispensations of Providence which in this life we cannot understand, and an assent to doctrines which may at present transcend our reason. Every day we see what we cannot account for, and believe what we do not distinctly comprehend. So that, if there were nothing of this kind in our religion, it would be like none of the other works of God that we are acquainted with, and would rather resemble the invention of a cautious man. But though the mysteries of Christianity may transcend human reason, not one of them contradicts it.

THAT there is a mediator between God and man, cannot appear contrary

to reason, or in any degree improbable, when we consider, that all the good things we receive, though the free gifts of God, come to us by the intervention of various agents and instruments.—That the divine dispensations with respect to the human race should comprehend a long train of effects and causes, and a long succession of years, will not seem extraordinary to those who have observed, as every considerate person must have done, that the growth of plants and animals, and all the other operations of nature, are progressive and gradual.—The incarnation is not to us more unintelligible, than the union of a human body with a human soul.—To atone voluntarily for the sin of others, may be as possible to a superior being, and in him may be as consonant to equity, as, among inferior beings, for one man gratuitously to pay another's debt.—That the grace
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of God should exert itself in supporting, cherishing, and sanctifying the true believer, is as easily understood, as any other exertion of divine goodness — And that there should be a resurrection of the body, is suitable to many analogies in nature, and particularly to that, alluded to by the apostle, of a new and flourishing vegetable rising from a buried and corrupted grain of corn.

WHILE one too anxiously endeavours to *explain* these, and some of the other mysterious doctrines of our religion, one may no doubt say unwarrantable things. But if we take them as they are delivered in Holy Writ, our only infallible standard of faith, we shall not find that they contain any thing, in which a man of the soundest and fairest mind, who has studied the

gospel and its evidences, may not without difficulty acquiesce.

4. THE last thing I shall mention, as a requisite to the profitable study of the New Testament, is a desire that it may be true. He, who has not this desire, must either be ignorant of Christianity and consequently unfit to receive it; or must be indifferent both to the glory of God and to the good of mankind, and consequently averse to the reception of it. That our religion should be true, is, as I remarked already, the interest of all men, except of those hardened sinners who are determined not to repent: for to the penitent believer, who regrets the frailty of his nature, and studies to reform it, the gospel speaks nothing but peace, and pardon, and everlasting comfort.



THAT

THAT we readily believe what we wish to be true, has been often said, and is become proverbial. But belief of this sort *may be* as rational as any other. I see a stranger, whose countenance and manner please me, and I wish to find him as good as he is agreeable: I cultivate his acquaintance, and after long trial discover that he is every thing I would have him to be. Is this discovery the less to be depended on, for having been preceded, and partly occasioned, by a prepossession in his favour? And if at first sight I had conceived a contrary prepossession, and always kept at a distance from him, and been unwilling to receive information concerning him, except from his enemies, should I not have persisted in my dislike, however unmerited on his part, and uncandid on mine? The former case is similar to that of those, who study Christianity

because they love it: the latter resembles that of him who remains in unbelief, because he dislikes the gospel, or disregards it.

CONVICTION may be extorted by evidence, so as to rise necessarily in every rational mind to whom the evidence is presented. Such is that which is enforced upon us by mathematical proof, or by the testimony of sense, or of memory. And in this kind of conviction there can be no more merit or demerit, than in seeing what is exposed to our view, or hearing what is sounded in our ear. Christian faith is not of this kind. In it the heart and affections are concerned, as well as the understanding. Our Lord pronounced no benediction on Thomas for having believed his sight and touch: ‘ but, ‘ Blessed, said he, are they who have ‘ not seen, and yet have believed:’
that

that is, 'who without such evidence of
 'sense (I quote Dr. Clarke's *Para-*
 'phrase) shall, upon credible testi-
 'mony, be willing to believe and em-
 'brace a doctrine which tends so
 'greatly to the glory of God, and the
 'salvation of men.' The doubts of
 Thomas were on this extraordinary oc-
 casion removed by *irresistible evidence*:
 but it would not have suited the genius
 of a religion, framed for proving the
 virtue and purifying the nature of
 moral beings, that its evidences in gene-
 ral should have been such as either to
 compel assent, or infringe the freedom
 of obedience. They are indeed so
 powerful, that nothing but ignorance,
 or hardness of heart, can prevent their
 making a deep impression; but their
 full effect is felt by those minds, only,
 who, together with lowliness, docility,
 and candour, entertain a predilection
 for that gospel, which proclaims 'Glo-
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‘ry to God in the highest, peace on
 ‘earth, and goodwill towards men.’
 In true Christian faith, therefore, there
 is virtue. It is indeed an assemblage
 of many virtues; of piety, benevolence,
 humility, and the love of truth and of
 goodness. No wonder, then, that the
 apostle should have declared, ‘that
 ‘without faith it is impossible to please
 ‘God.’

BUT, ought we not in charity to be-
 lieve, that there may be infidels of so
 good a heart as to love the doctrine,
 though they have the misfortune to be
 dissatisfied with the evidence, of the
 gospel? Charity, no doubt, ‘which
 ‘thinketh no evil,’ ought to make us
 believe that this is the case, wherever
 it is possible. But it is not possible, that
 this can be the case of those, who la-
 bour to subvert the faith of others; and
 who are so far from expressing regret
 at

at the discovery of any supposed defect in the evidence of Christianity, or seeming to think it a misfortune or a disappointment, that they rejoice in it, and triumph in that superior penetration, which they fondly imagine has enabled them to make it.

AND now, if, as I have endeavoured to prove, it appears from the declarations of our Saviour himself, and from the nature of the human mind, that they only can believe his religion, who attend to it, and who study it with candour, humility, and a sincere desire to find it true; is it wonderful, that those men should be unbelievers who write and speak against it, and show, by what they write and speak, that they do not understand, and have never studied it? Can that man wish the gospel to be true, who employs his life in labouring to prove it false? Can he
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be said to have read it with attention, or to have read it at all, who, with Rousseau, declares our Lord's miracles a discredit to his religion, and cannot distinguish between them and the tricks of jugglers? Can they be thought to have studied it with humility and candour, who sneer at it, like Shaftesbury; who laugh at it, like Voltaire; or who treat it with contempt and insult, like the cool and insidious Hume, or the proud and presumptuous Bolingbroke? Had religion been suited to heads and hearts like these, to them I should have left the defence of it; for it would have been a very different thing indeed from what it is. Their rejection of it supplies, if I mistake not, a pretty strong argument for its truth, as well as for its excellency.

II. Not only the number, and the learning, of unbelievers, but even their
virtue,

virtue, has been pleaded, in their behalf; and as an argument to prove, that Christianity is unnecessary.

OF their virtue, I have not much to say; enough indeed has been said by themselves, and their admirers. But ostentation is neither virtue, nor a sign of it: and perhaps the world would not have judged less favourably of them, if they had been more modest on this head. In fact, some late compliments that have been paid both to their VIRTUE and to their WISDOM, are so ridiculously extravagant, that they would have passed for derision, if not for scurrility, if they had not come from those who are known to be devoted adherents of the party.

To examine, with any degree of minuteness, the infidel's claim to the approbation and gratitude of mankind,
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by an inquiry into the private character of individuals, would be a task equally invidious and disagreeable. I leave it, therefore, to their biographers; whose labours, however, if we may be allowed to take *Rousseau's Confessions*, and *Voltaire's Memoirs of himself*, as a specimen of this sort of history, will not reflect great honour on either the infidel or his cause.

THERE are different sorts of infidels. Some not only reject our religion, but also write against it, and do what in them lies to make mankind reject it: others satisfy themselves with speaking of it occasionally in terms of dislike and scorn: and a third sort perhaps there may be, though they are not so frequently met with, who only disbelieve it, without seeking to make others disbelieve. These last are the objects of pity, rather than of blame: but
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it may be worth their while to consider, whether their unbelief be the effect of candid inquiry, or of prejudice and wilful inattention.

THE active and more zealous infidel either is certain, that we shall not in a future life be called to an account for our conduct in the present, or is somewhat uncertain with respect to that matter. Now, though he were absolutely certain, that our existence ends at death, or that the gospel is not true, (which no human being ever was, or can be), yet his endeavours to make others think so would do no honour to his goodness of heart. For infidels must know, that they cannot demonstrate, either that the gospel is false, or that a future state is impossible; and they must also know (or they know very little) that to a sincere Christian nothing can give more exquisite dis-

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tress,

trials, than to be perplexed with doubts concerning the truth of that religion which is the foundation of his dearest hopes. But if they be not themselves absolutely certain that there is no life to come, and yet labour to persuade others that there is none, their conduct must be imputed, not merely to want of benevolence, but to downright malignity.

For the language of such conduct is no other than this. Those people, who believe what we tell them, may, for any thing that we *certainly know* to the contrary, find themselves miserably mistaken after all: however their admiration flatters our vanity; and therefore we endeavour to make them think as we speak, be the consequences what they will. What sort of virtue is this? Is it not that of the madman mentioned by Solomon, who ‘ casteth fire-
‘ brands,

‘ brands, arrows, and death, and faith, ‘ am I not in sport ?’ Is it not that of a conceited theorist, who, in order to gratify his own beggarly ambition, tampers with the happiness of mankind, as if it were a thing of no value ?

‘ BUT you mistake the matter entirely,’ he will reply. ‘ I teach men ‘ to think freely, because I wish to rid ‘ the world of superstition, which is ‘ worse than irreligion, or even than ‘ atheism :’—and then perhaps he will run out into a detail of the enormities, that superstition has prompted Christians to perpetrate.

WHETHER it or atheism be the greater evil, is a point which, if prosecuted, would lead into a long and intricate inquiry. The former arises from false opinions concerning invisi-

ble beings; and as the forms of falsehood are innumerable, those of superstition must be so too; and to human society some of these may be more detrimental, others less, and some perhaps not at all. But, to shorten the controversy, I shall admit, that in all its forms superstition is a very bad thing; and that he would deserve well of mankind, who should drive it out of the world. But who is the man, who is most likely to do this? and what are the best means of doing it? The answer is easy: Jesus Christ is the man, and his religion the means. Had it not been for the divine goodness manifested in him, we should at this day have been pagans, the most superstitious of human kind. Wherever his religion is preached in its purity, superstition vanishes, like the birds of night at the rising of the sun. And as long as the existence of beings super-

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our to man is believed to be either probable or possible, the world, where it is not enlightened with the knowledge of the living and true God, will always be, as it always has been, superstitiously afraid of them. By divesting the human race of all religion, if that were practicable, you might no doubt free them from superstition: even as, by training poor children to midnight robbery, you might in time get the better of those ideas of nocturnal goblins, that may have been impressed upon their infancy. But before either expedient be tried, it would not be amiss to inquire, whether the cure is not worse than the disease, and whether the disease might not be more effectually cured, by teaching the knowledge of truth, and the love of virtue.—In fact, with superstition, with hypocrisy, with uncharitable or wrong-headed enthusiasm, and with all those

other enormities, which infidels charge on Christianity, in order to vindicate their dislike of it, Christianity is no more chargeable, and has nothing more to do than with house-breaking, gambling blasphemy, atheism, or witchcraft. Of this they cannot be ignorant, if they know any thing at all of the matter: and of a religion, or of a person, whereof they know nothing, modesty requires, that they should say nothing; candour at least requires, that they should say nothing abusive.

IN the ordinary affairs of life, when a man has been proved guilty of mistake or falsehood, it is expected, that he will make an acknowledgment to those who may have been injured by it; to the publick, if the publick have reason to complain, or to individuals, if they only have suffered by his temerity. At any rate, it is expected, that,

that, if he should not have made an acknowledgment in form, he will for the future be more cautious, and not give additional offence, by repeating those falsehoods whereof he has been convicted. But if he do neither; if he persevere in the same injurious conduct, and reiterate his former misrepresentations with as much confidence, as if, instead of having been confuted, they had never been answered, and were indeed unanswerable; what should we think of such a man? Should we extol him as a pattern of wisdom and virtue? Or should we not rather charge him with obstinacy and want of candour, such as an honest man would be ashamed of? Is it fair to examine by this rule the conduct of infidel writers? Or does the merit of having made books against religion raise them so high above all considerations of rectitude, as
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to justify in them what would go near to make other men infamous ?

Now, it is certain, that some late infidel writers lived to see many, and perhaps most, of their misrepresentations and sophistries, fairly exposed, and confuted unanswerably. And what was the consequence ? Did they acknowledge their errors, retract what they had falsely affirmed, correct their reasonings, or reform their principles ? Did they express any concern for having violated truth, ridiculed the religion of their country, or insulted the common sense of mankind ? No such matter. They went on publishing and republishing what they had formerly published, with the same assurance, as if nothing ever had been said, or could be said, against it.

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HITHERTO it does not appear, that we have any great reason to compliment these unbelievers upon their virtue. Wit and honour they may have, and eloquence, and polished manners, and learning: and all this the gambler and thief may have, as well as they, and in as great a degree. And it is very much the interest of the thief and gambler, as well as infidel writer, that he possess these and the like accomplishments. For, by fixing the public attention upon his outside, they make it the more easy for him to hide the dispositions that lurk within.

BUT why seek to depreciate the unbeliever's character by invidious comparisons? The comparisons are, in my opinion, fair and not invidious: however I drop them. Admitting then his behaviour to be as decent and regular as his admirers would have us believe,
yet

yet what can we hence infer? Little more, I apprehend, than that he is attentive to his interest, and the friend of his own cause. If I were to settle in France, and wished to be popular there, would it be any great merit in me, to comply with the customs, obey the law, and speak the language, of that country? Now, the enemies of Christ are, in more senses than one, strangers and sojourners in the Christian world. Its policy they did not contrive; its laws they did not make; its customs, and the general modes of thinking and speaking that prevail in it, they did not introduce. All this is as really the work of Christians, as the language and laws of France are the work of the French nation. And I presume it will be admitted, that, in the Christian commonwealth, the aliens compared with the citizens are still the minority, and but a small one. What then would the
unbe-

unbeliever gain, if in his manners, as well as opinions, he were to fet himself in opposition to the people among whom he resides? He would gain little popularity, and few profelytes; nay, by thus explaining and exemplifying his principles in his practice, he would disgust many whom it is his ambition to please; and make those consider him as a dangerous man, who now, from not rightly understanding his tenets, may look upon him as inoffensive, or at worst as only whimsical.

HE may, for example, with impunity laugh at the observance of the Sabbath; or complain of it, which I have heard him do, as a grievous interruption to industry: but if he were to force his servants and cattle to their customary work on that day, he would not be a gainer by his singularity. He may speak with contempt of those who
baptised

baptised him: but were he publickly to abjure his baptism, or refuse to admit his children to that rite, his profaneness and obstinacy would not raise him in the publick esteem. He may in his books abuse the ministers of God's word, and call them, as he has often done, enthusiasts and hypocrites: but were he in the public street to insult them with this language he would be pointed at as a madman, or a monster. He may, in a word, think as he pleases; and, in some nations, he may print and publish what he pleases: but violent measures, and practices directly opposite to those of the community in which he lives, would frustrate every scheme of the unbeliever. By good humour, a winning address, and such insinuation as may 'half show and half veil his deep intent,' he may work his way gradually into the hearts of men, and, in case of danger, secure an evasion

lien for himself, saying, ‘ Am I not in ‘ sport ?’—but all at once to throw off disguise, to make open war on Christianity, declaring those to be fools and knaves who believe it, and in the sight of all men to trample upon the laws of his country, whereof the institutions of Jesus form a very considerable part, would be equally ruinous to his cause and to himself.

III. OBJECTIONS have been raised against our religion, from the obscurity of particular doctrines and passages. But these obscurities have by some writers been both multiplied and magnified far beyond the truth. Father Simon endeavours to prove, that Scripture cannot be understood without the traditions of an infallible church: and it is easy to see his motives for supporting that opinion. But in fact, the essentials of religion are intelligible to all
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capacities ; especially to all who have been in any degree improved by Scriptural knowledge : for, without this, I must again repeat, that neither Christianity, nor its evidences, can ever be rightly understood. And, that, in a thing so extraordinary as divine revelation, there should be, as observed already, some particulars, which in this imperfect state we cannot distinctly comprehend, it would surely be reasonable to expect ; since we find, that in the other works of God there are innumerable appearances that surpass our comprehension. Nor less reasonable is it to suppose, that of an age and country so remote as that of the apostles, many customs and forms of speech, occasionally alluded to in their writings, may now be forgotten, or not perfectly intelligible.

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IN books too, that existed fourteen hundred years before the invention of printing, it can be no matter of wonder, that, by the inaccuracy of transcribers, there may have been introduced variations, and even corruptions of the original text. Yet these must have been inconsiderable ; more so perhaps, than those of any other antient writing. For first, the transcribers of the New Testament must have always engaged in their work with the idea that the book before them was sacred ; which would no doubt incline them to be as attentive as possible. Secondly, the mutual jealousy of the several sects of Christians, who all agreed in appealing to this book as the standard of faith, would make them examine with peculiar care those copies of it that might be circulated by adversaries, and be ready to expose any inaccuracy wherever it should appear. And thirdly, on

comparing the several copies and manuscripts; the many translations that have been made at different times, into different languages; and the innumerable quotations from holy writ that are found in the Greek and Latin fathers, it appears that the sacred text must have been in all ages very much the same. Bentley, whose skill in this sort of learning will not be questioned, observes, that the New Testament has suffered less injury from the hand of time, than any profane author. Indeed there never was any profane author, in whose preservation and purity mankind were so deeply interested, as all the Christian world have been, for these seventeen hundred years, in ascertaining, and preserving from corruption or change, the original records of Christianity.

As to the Old Testament, though it may have suffered more than the New,

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we have no reason to think it suffered much. It was entrusted to a people, who, satisfied of its divine origin, were so religiously careful of it, as to number the words, and even the letters, contained in the several books; and who, being also divided into sects, would be watchful to detect every error in transcription, whether the effect of design or of inadvertence.

By the mutual jealousy of religious parties, where it does not degenerate into uncharitableness, several good purposes may be answered. Being, as it were, spies on each other's conduct, they reciprocally stand in awe of each other: the natural effect of which is, to promote activity, vigilance, and emulation. And if we are at pains to cultivate that godliness, sobriety, and charity, which all Christians admit to be indispensable; and if we inquire

humbly into the truth, and pray for grace to discover it, which also they all acknowledge to be their duty; it may be presumed, from the goodness of our Creator, and from the different degrees of understanding which he has been pleased to bestow on different men, that diversities of opinion in speculative matters will not be imputed to us. Hence let all parties learn moderation and mutual forbearance. That man must have a strange turn of mind, who can bring himself to believe, that those Christians only can be saved, who think exactly as he does.

IN whatever way we employ ourselves in this world, it seems to be the intention of Providence that we shall have difficulties to encounter: for care, as Virgil observes, stimulates the soul, as inaction renders it lethargick. The cross accidents of life make invention,
 patience,

patience, and fortitude necessary, to prevent, to support, and to overcome them. Man, born ignorant, must labour in the acquisition of knowledge. His reason is weak, but it is improveable; and, from a sense of its weakness, he feels the necessity of improving it, by free and fair inquiry into the nature of those things that exercise it. Obscurities in philosophy, by forcing us to attend and investigate, rouse the inventive powers, and strengthen both the understanding and the memory. And the obscurities of religion, far from being considerable enough to discourage inquiry, serve only to awaken the curiosity of the Christian; disposing him to search the Scripture; to examine his own mind; to meditate on the nature, the providence, the word, and the works of God; to be humble, in consideration of his ignorance and infirmity; and to implore the aid of
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the Holy Spirit, to guide him into all necessary truth. Are these exercises detrimental to human nature? Are they not in the highest degree beneficial? Let not then the obscurities of particular passages and doctrines be objected to the religion of the New Testament. When fairly stated, they will be found rather to add to its evidence. At least they prove it to be exactly similar to the other works of the same great and good Being, who, by the constitution of every thing here below, plainly shows, that our present state is a state of trial.

THESE remarks may suggest an answer to what has been objected to our religion by those, who wonder, that, after having been preached seventeen hundred years in the most enlightened parts of the world, it should still need interpretation, and give scope to the labours

labours of the critic, translator, and antiquary. To him, who has studied the analogies of nature, this can be no matter of wonder. In the other works of God we are continually making new discoveries ; without foreseeing any end to human research, or any period that promises complete gratification to human curiosity. This having been the case in all past ages, and all other sciences, we may reasonably conclude that it will be so in every age to come ; and that the contemplation of the divine goodness and wisdom, as displayed in the works of creation and providence, may furnish delightful employment, even for eternity. For an almighty Creator may make his works of infinite extent, if he pleases ; and to a limited understanding the examination of that which is infinite can never come to an end.

EVERY

EVERY day we have something to do ; if we had not, we should be miserable. Every art and science admits of improvement ; if it did not, the human mind would languish in idleness, human labour would no longer be amusing, and the spirit of enterprise, and the vicissitudes of hope and fear, would be no more ; a state of things equally inconsistent with the virtue and the happiness of such a creature as man. The essential doctrines of our religion, like the practical and most necessary parts of agriculture, medicine, navigation, and other sciences, are within the reach of every mind, who is willing to be instructed. And yet, in our religion, as in the arts and sciences, there still is, and probably will continue to be, room for inquiry, and need of illustration : and he who humbly inquires, with a sincere desire to know the truth and do good by explaining

plaining it, will ever have reason to rejoice in his labour, as contributing no less to his own happiness and virtue, than to that of mankind. To which let me add, with respect to those who employ themselves in illustrating theological truth, that, as long as men are liable to mistake, the penetration of one may be useful in correcting the inaccuracy of another.

IV. SOME are at a loss to reconcile the inspiration of the evangelists with those particulars wherein their gospels seem to differ from one another. They do not all record the same things, nor do they relate all the same events in the same manner. The differences are indeed minute; but they are perceptible. How could this be, if the historians were inspired? The following answer to this query is submitted to the reader.

SOCRATES

SOCRATES long ago observed, that man has no need of supernatural information concerning those things which his natural faculties are alone sufficient to discover. To enable the apostles to comprehend all evangelical truth, supernatural light was necessary. Their Master accordingly promised it, and on the day of Pentecost, or soon after, they received it. I say, *or soon after*, because, subsequent to the descent of the Holy Spirit on that day, a particular revelation, relating to the conversion of the Gentiles, was made to Peter, and the whole scheme of the gospel, as well as its miraculous gifts and graces, communicated to Paul by immediate inspiration. After this we find, that in their *doctrine* they lay claim to infallibility in pretty strong terms. On some extraordinary emergencies, too, in the course of their ministry, as in the case of their being arraigned

raigned before kings and rulers, it was promised, that they should receive aid from heaven in making their defence.

BUT inspiration was not necessary to enable them to see and hear; or to teach them how to conduct themselves in the common business of life. After their conversion, we have no reason to think, that John was a more expert fisherman, or Luke a more skilful physician, than before. As historians, therefore, they need not, I presume, be considered in any other light, than that of honest men, recording what they saw and heard, and had examined, and were competent judges of, and deeply interested in: for, on this supposition, their testimony is fully sufficient to establish the truth of the gospel. And this may account for their not all recording the same things, nor

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describing the same events in exactly the same way.

IF John, for example, saw his Master do, or heard him say, what Matthew did not see or hear, which might have happened in a hundred instances, it was equally natural, for the former to record, and for the latter not to record it. And if Matthew and Mark, supposed to have been spectators of the crucifixion, were so stationed in the croud, as to hear the one robber revile their dying Lord, and to see the other move his lips, but without hearing what he said, it was not unnatural for them to conclude, as the combination against him seemed now to be universal, that both the robbers reviled him; which yet Luke, or some other person from whom Luke received his information, might by being more advantageously situated, and hearing the
words

words of the penitent robber, know to be true of only one of them. At any rate, we may with confidence affirm, that if the evangelists had been to invent a fable, and obtrude it on the world for truth, they would have taken care that there should be no such contrariety in their testimonies, as there confessedly is in this instance: which, however, is not so important, as either to detract from the veracity of the historians, or throw any blemish on the purity of the gospel.

THE same thing may be said of our Lord's genealogy, as it is differently stated by Matthew and Luke. If either account had been false, both would not have existed. Both therefore are true; and may be reconciled, by supposing the one to be the genealogy of his mother and the other that of his reputed father. In the most material ar-

ticles they agree ; namely, that he was descended from Abraham, and of the family of David. And it is impossible to imagine any motive, that could induce either Luke or Matthew to misrepresent the subsequent articles ; as among a people, so curious in genealogy as the Jews were, the error might be so easily found out.

WHEN the matter inquired into is very complex, an exact coincidence in the testimony of witnesses is not expected. Let them be ever so attentive and candid, they could not have stood all in the same place, nor consequently have taken notice of the very same particulars without variation. Of some sort of facts, too, the memory of some men is more tenacious than that of others. One remembers best what he saw, another what he heard : one attends to the connection of events with
their

their effects and causes; another rather considers them separately, and as each event is in itself. Hence, as formerly observed, some diversities in what they declare, concerning circumstances of little moment, would convey a favourable opinion of the veracity of witnesses whereas a perfect sameness of declaration might, in the case supposed, breed suspicion of a preconcerted plan.

BUT though, after the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the apostles laid claim to infallibility of doctrine, they never gave out, that their *whole conduct* was under the guidance of inspiration. They were indeed holy men: but still they were men; and, as such, liable both to sins of infirmity, which they humbly acknowledge, and from which they affirm that no man is free, and also to error, not in doctrine indeed, but in those matters

of less moment, in which they had nothing but their own reason to direct them. ' If we say we have no sin, says ' St. John, we deceive ourselves, and the ' truth is not in us.' ' We are men of ' like passions with you,' said Paul and Barnabas, when the people of Lystra were preparing to pay them divine honours. And here, let me ask in passing, whether these two apostles, if they had been impostors, or wished to gain undue influence over the minds of men, would have been so zealous in refusing those honours, and so anxious to convert that people from idolatry. And let me ask further, with respect to the apostles in general, whether, if ambition, or vanity, or any other principle than the love of truth, had been the motive of their conduct, they would so uniformly, and with such solemnity of protestation, have ascribed all the glory of their miracles and doctrine, not
to

to themselves, but to their crucified Lord.

AND now, if I have rightly stated the nature of their inspiration, can it appear strange, or in any respect derogatory from the character of the apostles and evangelists, that Paul and Barnabas should differ in opinion, concerning the propriety of taking John surnamed Mark along with them: that this John should have been suspected of a temporary neglect of duty*: that Peter and Paul, though men of distinguished fortitude, should on one or two occasions have been seized with a momentary fit of fear; or that the former apostle should have been reproved by the latter, for an inconsistency of conduct, owing to his having been, in one particular case, too indulgent

* Acts xv. 37—40.

gent to certain prejudices of his Jewish countrymen* ;—a principle very natural in itself, especially to a warm-hearted affectionate man like Peter, and in ordinary cases not very blameable ? All this might have appeared strange, if the apostles had ever pretended that their conduct was as blameless as their doctrine. But they modestly declared it was not. Does this invalidate their testimony ? Does it not, on the contrary, do honour to their candour, and prove them to have been equally incapable of deceit and of ostentation ?

V. CHRISTIANITY, it has been said, is a religion so ill adapted to this world, that it is impossible to live here, as people must do, and yet comply with the strictness of its morality. I admit, that human affairs are too often conducted

* Galat. ii. 11.

ducted on principles very different from those of Jesus ; that the man who sets his affections on this world, and resolves to act accordingly, will not find encouragement in the gospel ; and that to the voluptuous, the ignorant, and the thoughtless part of mankind, the behaviour of a sincere Christian may sometimes appear not a little singular. Nor can this seem wonderful to those who consider, that our Lord came into the world, to teach men, not how to become rich, renowned, or great, but how to prepare themselves for eternity. But though the principles of Christian and of worldly policy are too often inconsistent, it does not follow, that they are necessarily so, or that they ought to be so. Human affairs, conducted on Christian principles, would transform this world, which, notwithstanding all that human laws can do, is a very confused scene, into

into an elysium of righteousness and peace.

OUR religion prohibits all injustice, contention, covetousness, pride, revenge, turbulence, hatred, and discontent; and all pleasures, passions, and purposes, that tend to debase the soul, or molest our neighbour. It enjoins compassion, liberality, and faithfulness; and declares, that no other virtue can make amends for the want of that benevolence or charity, ‘ which suffereth
 ‘ long and is kind, envieth not, vaunt-
 ‘ eth not itself, is not puffed up, doth
 ‘ not behave itself unseemly, seeketh
 ‘ not its own, is not easily provoked,
 ‘ thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth*.’
 What is there in this charity, that tends to interrupt the business or innocent comforts

* 1 Cor. xiii.

comforts of life, or the prosperity of nations? The injurious man, and the sensual, the proud, the covetous, and the hard-hearted, may object to the morality of the gospel, as the cheat and robber may to the laws of the land, as unreasonably severe: but the just, the intelligent, the good-natured, and the sober-minded, will ever be of a different opinion. Those devout and generous affections, that continually prevail in the breast of a true Christian, are in themselves exquisitely delightful; and, instead of lessening other innocent pleasures, cannot fail to increase, ennoble, and refine them.

THE gospel, say some, does no where recommend patriotism or the love of our country; that sublime virtue, so highly celebrated by the Greeks and Romans, which gives elevation to the human soul, and has produced so many
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great characters and gallant deeds.— It is true, that a Christian's principles make him a citizen of the world ; by declaring it to be his duty to wish well, and, as he has opportunity, to do good to all men, whatever be their religion, or country. And it is also true, that patriotism, when it divests a man of Christian benevolence, and makes him indifferent to the welfare of the stranger and the alien, ceases to be a virtue, and becomes a surly, savage, and selfish thing. What should we think of the clown, who would refuse to take concern in human affairs, except within the precincts of his own parish ? In the eye of the Christian philosopher, that person is equally censurable, for his narrow views and want of humanity, who is interested for his own country only, or who, in order to raise it, would pull others down. Patriotism is partly a selfish, and partly a generous

nerous principle. Whatever is selfish in it Christianity discountenances ; whatever is generous it recommends.

A PARTIALITY in favour of those who depend on us, who are related to us by blood or by friendship, and who worship the same God and Saviour whom we worship, as it is natural to man, is also suitable to the spirit of the gospel. Our Lord commanded his apostles to make the first offers of salvation to their countrymen the Jews : and he himself, foreseeing the ruin of his country, addressed Jerusalem in the most pathetick strains of affection, and wept over it. ‘ If any provide not for ‘ his own,’ says the apostle, ‘ especially ‘ for those of his own house, he hath ‘ denied the faith, and is worse than an ‘ infidel. ‘ As we have opportunity,’ says he in another place, ‘ let us do ‘ good unto all men, especially unto

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‘ them

‘ them that are of the household of
 ‘ faith.’²

OUR Saviour graciously forbids excessive anxiety * with regard to the events of life, and the good things of this world ; but his religion, as well as that of Moses, is most unfriendly to indolence ; and his apostles recommended industry, both by precept, and by example. Nay, there is reason to think that he himself had laboured with his own hands in his reputed father’s

* Mat. vi. 25.—34. That phrase in our version, *take no thought*, does not now give the meaning of the Greek term. But, as an apology for the translators, it may be observed, that, in the English of their time, *thought* was sometimes used to express great anxiety, or solicitude. Bacon, in his history of Henry VII. speaks of man, who *died with thought and anguish*.

ther's profession: for otherwise his townsmen would not have called him the carpenter. He prohibits revenge and contention, but not self-defence; and this no lawgiver ever found it necessary to enjoin, as the instincts of our nature, and the well-being of society, render it indispensable. And though, with respect to injury, the first disciples were commanded to be passive; as we all are, to forbear, and forgive: yet he allowed them to speak in their own vindication, and even promised supernatural aid, when they should be obliged to do so.

WAR cannot suit the genius of a religion, whose end is peace: but what then? If wars were to cease throughout the world, would society be less comfortable than it is, or any nation less flourishing? All mankind speak of war as a calamity. But war, it will

be urged, is unavoidable. Perhaps it may be so: and when it is, that religion surely cannot be said to forbid it, which permits self defence, and enjoins submission to government. There is no opposition between the character of a good Christian and that of a valiant foldier. Military merit is celebrated with high encomiums in the Old Testament. In the New, foldiers are often spoken of with honour, and several devout ones are particularly mentioned. Our Lord praised the faith of the centurion whose servant he healed; intimating that he was in the way of salvation. When the centurion Cornelius was baptised by Peter, he was neither blamed for having followed that employment, nor desired to relinquish it. The advice given by John the Baptist to the foldiers was (not to throw away their arms, and cultivate the arts of peace, but) to be inoffensive in their
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behaviour, and content with their wages. And when the Ephesians are desired to ‘take unto them the whole ‘armour of God, the breast-plate of ‘righteousness, the shield of faith, the ‘helmet of salvation, and the sword of ‘the spirit,’ these, with many other scriptural allusions of a like nature, are honourable to the military profession. In fact, there are few professions in life, that may give scope to so many Christian virtues. In him who merits the character of a good soldier, we expect to find modesty, moderation, gentleness, patience, clemency, and simple manners; and they, who have been much in the world, must have met with many instances to warrant this expectation.

BUT friendship, the source of so many comforts, and without which life would soon become a burden, is no

where mentioned in the New Testament as a Christian virtue. This has by some been thought an objection to the morality of the gospel, as well as a proof of its unsuitableness to the general tenor of human affairs. But Shaftesbury, who I think was the first that started this cavil, might have been asked, from which of his admired antients he had learned, that friendship is a virtue? Cicero, who wrote an elegant book on the subject, would not have taught him so: for between friendship and virtue he distinguishes, when he says, in the conclusion of the book, that virtue is more excellent than friendship, and that it is virtue which makes friendship, and preserves it. Nor is Aristotle positive on this head; tho' he owns that friendship and virtue are connected. And so indeed they are; as the one may give occasion to the other; even as partnership in trade
may

may give rise to fidelity and industry, or fidelity and industry to a bond of partnership. But though fidelity and industry are virtues, partnership is not a virtue; nor is any trader praised for having partners, or blamed for not having them. And to be without friends, when it is owing to no misconduct of ours, is a very great misfortune indeed; but no rational being ever thought of calling it a fault. All the *virtues* comprehended in friendship, all the *duties* that one friend owes another, are in Scripture enjoined by precept, and set in the most engaging light by example. Wherein, then, is Scripture deficient with respect to friendship? In this only, that it contains no such precept as the following:

‘ And thou shalt make choice of a certain person, or of certain persons, because he is, or they are, agreeable to thee; and thou shalt love him, or them,

‘ them, more than others ; and thou
 ‘ shalt, moreover, make him or them
 ‘ love thee in like manner.’ Would
 not this be charming legislation?
 Would it not prove the lawgiver to be
 profoundly skilled in the nature of
 man, and of human affairs ? Yet such,
 in the case before us, seems to have
 been the skill, and such the penetra-
 tion, of the author of *Characteristicks*.

IN a word ; if temperance, piety,
 and social love ; if meekness, integrity,
 and mercy ; if a disposition to be quiet
 and mind our own business ; if to ab-
 stain from evil, and suppress every in-
 jurious purpose, be beneficial to man,
 and tend both to private and to publick
 good ; it follows, that our religion is,
 even for this world, the best policy ;
 and that the disorders we see around us
 are owing, not to Christianity, but to
 the prevalence of unchristian practice,
 and

and antichristian principles. So that to think of improving human affairs by taking off the restraints of Christian morality, is not less absurd, than to propose to improve commerce by a repeal of the laws that prohibit forgery and theft.

VI. BUT is not the world as wicked now, as it was in the days of paganism? And did not antient times produce as great men, as any of those who have distinguished themselves in these latter ages? What mighty benefit, then, in respect either of manners or of policy, have mankind derived from the Christian religion?

THOUGH the two former questions were to be answered in the affirmative, it would not weaken the evidence of the gospel. The first preachers of it never said that the great ends proposed

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ed by it would be accomplished immediately, or even soon; or that every one 'who should name the name of 'Christ *would* depart from iniquity.' On the contrary, they spoke so often, and so particularly, of the corruption of latter ages, that we cannot doubt of their having foreseen it. If even of the twelve, who were chosen by our Lord himself, 'one was a devil,' of what other Christian society could it be expected, that all the members would 'adorn the doctrine of God our 'Saviour in all things?' As long as we are in a state of trial, there must be evils, both physical and moral, to exercise our virtue; as long as we are fallible, our virtue must be tainted with imperfection, and our knowledge with error; and, as long as repentance and faith are Christian duties, man will be a sinful creature, and exposed to various temptations, from the example
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of the wicked, the corruption of his own heart, and the sophistry of the unbeliever. Every thing in our religion has a reference to a future life. Of its importance, therefore, to the virtue and happiness of mankind, it is not possible for us to be competent judges, till hereafter our faith be lost in vision, our trial at an end, and our minds expanded so as to take in the whole extent of this wonderful dispensation, in all its tendencies and consequences.

MEANWHILE, however, we know enough both of Christianity and of human nature, to see that mankind are in many respects improved by the religion of Jesus. To state an exact comparison between Christian and pagan manners, is indeed impossible. We are not ignorant of the vices of our own times : but who will pretend to compute the probable amount of
Christian

Christian virtue; whereof it is the character, rather to shrink from public view, than display itself to the world? And of the crimes and virtues of the heathen we know little but what is recorded in their histories, or alluded to in their other writings.

I: WITH respect to the matter now before us, the first question ought to be stated thus: Whether we have not reason to think, that mankind are upon the whole wiser and happier than they would have been, if the Holy Scriptures had never existed. Let him who is at a loss for an answer compare the theology, and the morality, of Christ and Moses, with that of those nations, who never had any opportunity of deriving knowledge from those great sources of wisdom, the Old and New Testaments.

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We must with shame and sorrow confess, that many who are called Christians are a disgrace to their religion; nay, I am afraid that one might without breach of charity admit, that many of them are as desperately wicked, as any barbarian or pagan that can be named. But this cannot be imputed to a religion, which they neither obey nor believe, nor wish to understand; to a religion, that denounces 'tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man who does evil,' and promises 'glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good.' Because the best things may be abused or despised by those who are unworthy of them, does it follow, that the best things are evil or insignificant? Or, if a man's appetite were so depraved as to feed on nothing but noxious weeds, would that be any ob-

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jection to the usefulness of corn, or of agriculture ?

OF those who worship the living and true God, is not the condition preferable to that of him, who trembles before the shrine of devils, and idols, of stocks, stones, and vegetables, of brutes, monsters, and vermin ? In this respect, is not the superiority of the Christian over the pagan almost, if not altogether, as great, as that of a man over a beast ? And let it never be forgotten, that if it had not been for Jesus Christ and Moses, and the divine goodness manifested in them, the whole world would at this day have been barbarous, or pagan, or both, and likely to continue so as long as there were men upon the earth.

IN this argument it is not necessary to advert to the condition of savages,
canni-

cannibals, and the worst sort of barbarians. He who can look upon such misery without compassion and horror, or without a due sense of the blessings derived from Christianity and civilized manners, must be equally destitute of humanity and of reason. But may not the wisdom and virtue of the antient Greeks and Romans, in their most civilized state, bear a comparison with the manners and literature of the Christian world?

IN some respects they may, in others they cannot. For example, it will not be pretended, that, in any Christian country, a father may either adopt his new-born infant, (if I may use the expression), or abandon it to famine and beasts of prey;—that the massacre of slaves is part of a funeral solemnity in honour of great men deceased;—that horrid obscenities form any part of re-

ligious worship?—that the most unnatural crimes are not only practised without shame, but celebrated by poets, and coolly mentioned as customary things, even by the gravest writers ;—that, to gratify an ambitious profligate, inoffensive nations are invaded, enslaved, or exterminated ;—that, for the amusement of a few young soldiers, two or three thousand poor unarmed and innocent men may be murdered in one night, with the connivance, nay and by the authority, of the law ;—that the most worthless tyrants are flattered with divine honours when alive, and worshipped as Gods when dead ;—that prisoners of war are enslaved, or impaled, or crucified for having fought in defence of their country, and in obedience to their lawful rulers ;—that captive kings and nations are publicly insulted by their conquerors, in those barbarous solemnities which of old
were

were called triumphs;—that men are trained up for the purpose of cutting one another to pieces, by thousands and ten thousands in a month*, for the diversion of the publick;—that, as the father of gods and men, a king of Crete is worshipped, whom even his worshippers believe to have been guilty of innumerable crimes of the most infamous nature; while, among the other objects of divine worship are to be reckoned thieves, drunkards, harlots, ruffians; to say nothing of those underling idols, whose functions and attributes it is not decent even to name.—They, who are ever so little acquainted with antient Greece and Rome,

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* Lipsius affirms, (Sat. B. 1. C. 12.) that the gladiatorial show sometimes cost Europe twenty or thirty thousand lives in a month; and that not only the men, but even the women, of all ranks, were passionately fond of these shows. See Bishop Porteus, Sermon xiii.

know that I allude, not to the depravities of individuals only, but to the avowed opinions, and fashionable practice, of those celebrated nations. Surely, modern manners, censurable as we confess them to be in so many respects, are regulated, in the Christian world, by principles very different. And were they in all respects regulated, as they ought to be, by the pure principles of the gospel, we need not hesitate to affirm, that the virtue of Christians would as far transcend that of the Greeks and Romans, as the arts and literature of England surpass those of New Zealand or the land of Hottentots.

THIS affirmation is warranted by what we see of the influence of the gospel among those who believe and obey it; whose numbers, though far short of what they ought to be, are by
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no means inconsiderable. And it is still further warranted by what we know of the first Christians ; to whom the gospel was preached in its primitive simplicity ; who believed it with full assurance of faith ; and whose manners were accordingly pure and perfect to a degree, which, as an elegant author observes, it is almost as difficult for us to conceive as to imitate.

AND is it not infinitely to the honour of our religion, that the more firmly it is believed, and the less it is corrupted by human invention, the more powerful it is in improving and purifying the human soul ? Does not this show it to be something superior to all human contrivance ? Does not this prove, how wisely it is adapted to its end, namely, to the purpose of renewing our nature, and raising it again to that felicity which was forfeited by the fall ?

fall? Is this either the end, or the tendency, of any other religion, or of any other system of opinions, that ever appeared in the world?

WHEN, a few centuries after the apostolick age, partly by the craft of man, and partly by circumstances peculiar to times of ignorance and trouble, this religion came to be almost effaced by superstition, it then lost its sanctifying influence; and furious passions, unjustifiable wars, and horrid massacres, disgraced Europe. Was this owing to Christianity? No; it was owing to the want of it. But the revival of learning hastened forward the Reformation, as the Reformation promoted the advancement of learning; the Scripture was studied, and Christianity was again understood. And though its influence is still unhappily counteracted by various causes; by the malignity

nity of the infidel, by the blind zeal of the enthusiast, by the errors of human policy, and by the lamentable depravity of the human heart ; yet has it diffused through the most enlightened nations a generosity and gentleness of manners unknown to paganism ; and, in particular, co-operated with some other causes in transforming war, that necessary evil, into a system of hostility, which, compared with the rancour and ravage of former wars, may almost be called, in the language of Milton, ‘ a civil game.’

WHEN modern infidels object to our religion, that it has been the cause of massacre and persecution, it is enough for the believer, after stating the fact just now mentioned, to refer them to the New Testament ; and desire them, if they can, to produce from it a single passage, that gives countenance to persecution

secution or massacre. If they can find none ; if, on the contrary, it be found, that our Saviour and his apostles invariably recommend, and by the most awful sanctions enjoin, compassion, justice, forbearance, forgiveness, meekness, mercy, and charity, declaring, that without these virtues men are not Christians, be their professions what they will ; surely candour ought to incline the adversary to impute the evils complained of, not to our religion, but to the depravity or folly of those wretched men, who have corrupted or disguised it by unwarrantable additions and misrepresentations ; or who, knowing the power of religion over the human heart, have made use of its venerable name for the more effectual accomplishment of their own ambitious, sensual, or sanguinary purposes*.

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* See Bishop Porteus, Sermon xii.

Is the physician's prescription to be blamed, because they who administered, or who swallowed, the draught, have thought proper to mix it with noxious ingredients of their own contrivance? Or, while all our senses bear testimony to its purity, is the fountain to be undervalued, because men may have been so unwise, or so wicked, as to pollute the stream? As long as we have the means of knowing the genuine doctrine of the gospel, that is, as long as the New Testament remains, it is not less repugnant to every idea of justice or candour to impute to Christianity the evil deeds of those who profess it, than it would be to upbraid a pious and prudent father with the disobedience of a profligate son, or to arraign a good sovereign for the crimes of a rebellious subject.

2. WHAT the second objection states, concerning the great men of pagan antiquity, I am not solicitous to controvert. The abilities displayed by some of those commanders, orators, historians, poets, statuaries, and architects, were, I confess, very great ; and perhaps, have not been excelled or equalled since their time. But this affects not the present argument. A Christian may be a great man, and his religion will in many cases help to make him truly so: but Christ and his apostles taught, and suffered, and died, not to make men renowned in this world, but to raise them to glory, honour, and immortality, in that which is to come. The persons, on whom he pronounced benediction, were, not the learned, the ingenious, or the mighty, but the poor in spirit, the pure in heart, the meek, the merciful, the penitent, and the lovers of righteousness
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and peace. To the heathen moralist and his disciple, whose views did not reach beyond the present life, it might be a very interesting matter to know, by what means a man may so distinguish himself as to be admired by his fellow-citizens: but to the Christian, whose supreme concern it is to please God, and whose views extend forward to eternity, this is but a trivial consideration.

VII. By some well-meaning but weak minds, and by some of a different character, who were vain of their philosophy, the apparent insignificance of the human race may have been thought to lessen the credibility of the Christian religion. Compared to the extent of our solar system this earth is but a point; and the solar system itself, compared to the universe, may be little more. How then, say they, is it

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possible to imagine, that such creatures as we are can be of so great importance, as that the Deity should send his Son, accompanied with so many displays of divine power, into this little world, to instruct us by his doctrine and example, and die on a cross to accomplish our salvation !

THIS is indeed an astonishing proof of the goodness of the great Creator, and of the condescension of that glorious Person, who, for our sake, willingly submitted to such debasement. But the infinite goodness and power of God, though surpassing all comprehension cannot exceed the belief of those who know, that he, in order to communicate felicity, created this boundless universe, with all the varieties of being it contains ; whom he continually supports and govern, and with every individual of whom he is continually

nually present. The object may be too vast for any intelligence that is short of infinite: but to Him who sees all things, and can do all things, who had no beginning, and can have no end, all this must be easy; incomparably easier indeed, than it is for a father to take care of his child, or for a generous friend to relieve his indigent neighbour. God's dispensations with respect to man may reasonably enough overwhelm us with gratitude and adoration, and with a most humiliating sense of our own unworthiness; but let us take care that they do not raise within us an evil spirit of unbelief: which they will not do, unless we have the inexcusable temerity to judge of him by ourselves; and to infer, because our goodness is nothing, that his cannot be perfect; and, because we are ignorant and weak, that he cannot be omniscient and almighty.

Far less absurd would it be, for the unlettered peasant to deny the possibility of calculating eclipses ; for the blind to believe, that, because they cannot see, there is none else who can ; and for the poor to conclude, because they cannot relieve themselves, that it is not in the power of generosity to relieve them.

GREAT extent is a thing so striking to our imagination, that sometimes, in the moment of forgetfulness, we are apt to think nothing can be important but what is of vast corporeal magnitude. And yet, even to our apprehension, when we are willing to be rational, how much more sublime and more interesting an object is a mind like that of Newton, than the unwieldly force and brutal stupidity of such a monster as the poets describe Polyphemus ? Who, that had it in his power, would scruple to destroy

stroy a whale, in order to preserve a child ! Nay, when compared with the happiness of one immortal mind, the greatest imaginable accumulation of inanimate substance must appear an insignificant thing. ‘ If we consider, ‘ says Bentley, the dignity of an intelligent being, and put that in the scale ‘ against brute and inanimate matter, ‘ we may affirm, without overvaluing ‘ human nature, that the soul of one ‘ virtuous man is of greater worth and ‘ excellency, than the sun and his planets, and all the stars in the world.’ Let us not then make bulk the standard of value ; or judge of the importance of man from the weight of his body, or from the size or situation of the planet that is now his place of abode.

OUR Saviour, as if to obviate objections of this nature, expresses most emphatically the superintending care of

Providence, when he teaches, that it is God who adorns the grass of the field, that without him a sparrow falls not on the ground, and that even the hairs of our head are numbered. Yet this is no exaggeration; but must, if God is omniscient and almighty, be literally true. By a stupendous exuberance of animal, vegetable, and mineral production, and by an apparatus still more stupendous (if that were possible) for the distribution of light and heat, he supplies the means of life and comfort to the short-lived inhabitants of this globe. Can it then appear incredible; nay, does not this consideration render it in the highest degree probable, that he has also prepared the means of eternal happiness for beings, whom he has formed for eternal duration, whom he has endowed with faculties so noble as those of the human soul, and for whose accommodation chiefly, during their present

present state of trial, he has provided all the magnificence of this sublunary world?

As far as our knowledge of nature extends, there is a wonderful suberviency of one thing to another. By means of comets it is probable, and by means of attraction it is possible, that our solar system may be connected with other solar systems. Our primary and secondary planets, all dependent on the great central orb, reciprocally transmit their influences; whereby our atmosphere is variously affected, and prepared for yielding nourishment to the innumerable tribe of animal and vegetable nature that surround us: and from man to the most diminutive insect, and from the oak and cedar to the smallest organised body the microscope can discover, every individual being is not only complete in itself, consisting
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of parts mutually adapted, and operating to their respective ends, but is also subservient to the necessities of we know not how many other animal and vegetable species.—In unseen worlds is it not probable, that similar analogies may take place ?

IN this our first period of existence, our eye cannot penetrate beyond the present scene, and the human race appears one great and separate community : but with other worlds and other communities, we probably may, and every argument for the truth of our religion gives us reason to think that we shall, be connected hereafter. And if by our behaviour we may, even while here, as our Lord positively affirms, heighten in some degree the felicity of angels, our salvation may hereafter be a matter of importance, not to us only, but to many other orders

ders of immortal beings. They, it is true, will not suffer for our guilt, nor be rewarded for our obedience. But it is not absurd to imagine, that our fall and recovery may be useful to them as an example ; and that the divine grace manifested in our redemption may raise their adoration and gratitude into higher raptures, and quicken their ardour to inquire, with ever new delight, into the dispensations of infinite wisdom. This is not mere conjecture. It derives plausibility from many analogies in nature ; as well as from Holy Writ, which, represents the mystery of our redemption as an object of curiosity to superiour beings, and our repentance as an occasion of their joy.

THAT mankind should, in every part of their duration, remain a separate community, and unconnected with all the rest of the universe, would be a
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very extravagant conceit. Yet, even on this supposition, they would not lose their importance; and the religion of our Saviour, considered as the means of eternal happiness to millions of the human race, will appear a work of such benignity, as could only proceed from the best of beings, and of such magnitude, as to be worthy of the greatest.

It is a strange perversion of science, when men contract their views in the same proportion in which their knowledge of nature is extended. Yet this must be the case of those, who think it easier to divine power to make and preserve one world, than to create and govern ten thousand worlds. If we judge of the divine power from what we know of our own, both are impossible. And to divine power, supposed to be infinitely superiour to ours,

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both are not only possible, but easy, and equally so. The time was, when this globe was believed to be the universe; and the sun, moon, and stars, to have been framed for no other purpose, but to enlighten and adorn this our habitation. If he who entertains this opinion find no difficulty in conceiving it possible for the Deity to superintend terrestrial things, and to prepare the means of happiness, both here and hereafter, for man, to whose dominion they are all subjected; why should it be more difficult for the enlightened astronomer to conceive, that the Creator of all worlds is equally powerful to preserve, and equally attentive to provide for, the innumerable works of his hand! Every new discovery in the visible universe ought to give elevation, and a new impulse, to the pious affections: and the further we see that the works of God extend,
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the more let us be overwhelmed with devout astonishment, in the contemplation of his infinite, eternal, and universal Being.

PARADOXICAL writers have flattered themselves, that infidelity would gain ground as philosophy advances. So sanguine, as I have been informed, was a late projector in this way, that he would sometimes give it as his opinion, that Christianity could not outlast the present century. I wish he had lived to see his mistake. By sophistry the faith of individuals may be unsettled; but that of nations is not so easily shaken: and sophistry never prevails long in opposition to common sense. From true philosophy, and a right use of reason, our religion has nothing to apprehend. The more carefully and candidly it is studied, the more conspicuous will its truth and beauty appear.

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Wherever is and human nature are understood, they are found so admirably suited to each other, that the believer needs not fear, and it is vain for the adversary to wish, their final separation. God has joined them, and it is not in man's power to put them asunder. This hope, from considering the character of man, and the genius of the gospel, we should have had reason to rejoice in, even though the highest authority had not assured us, that against the church of Christ not even the gates of hell shall prevail.

THE stomach must be depraved, that transforms aliment into poison; and the eye cannot be sound, which daylight dazzles into blindness. Nor less unsound, or less depraved, is that understanding, which perverts science into unbelief, and becomes ignorant of God in proportion as the world is en-

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• OBJECTIONS ANSWERED.

lightened with the knowledge of his works. Minute cavillers may grow more sceptical, the greater dexterity they acquire in misrepresenting facts, and misapplying language. But I know not whether a single instance can be mentioned of a truly philosophick mind, who both understood Christianity, and disbelieved it.



THE END.

